Introduction

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Understanding young people's societal participation and well-being: exploring the unbeaten path

Currently, humankind is confronting many intersecting crises threatening planetary and human existence: climate change, ecological collapse, wars, sociopolitical upheavals and social catastrophes, forced migration and human rights infringements, all of which are entangling in complex ways and are impacted by the still lingering repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The dominant neoliberal model based on continuing economic growth has already exceeded the ecological limits of the earth, and if nothing – or too little, too late – is done, the situation will continue to worsen, leading to disastrous consequences (IPCC 2022). Critical views maintain that the neoliberal economic system causes serious ecological damage as well as increases inequality and the concentration of wealth in the hands of only a few (see e.g., Leskošek & Zidar 2017, 251; Oxfam 2015). Many scholars and experts claim that profound structural, systemic change is imperative to maintain viable, resilient and sustainable conditions for contemporary and future generations (e.g., Gough 2015, 2017; Helne & Hirvilammi 2021). Changes are needed simultaneously in the economic, ecological and social spheres and at the local and global levels, including a substantial reduction in energy-intensive consumption and a move towards a more equitable distribution of wealth. This necessitates a new vision of the future for humanity and the planet's well-being. Such a systemic transition is thoroughly social, requiring paradigmatic changes in how we view future societies and the relations between the human and non-human world, including serious rethinking of the question regarding what or who is (accepted as) "human" (Braidotti 2013, 2019; Fox & Alldred 2020; Haraway 1991). Importantly, this also requires seriously considering the views and experiences of disenfranchised groups around the world, including in the Global South (Gough 2017; Hill Collins & Bilge 2020, 234–235).

This book contributes to this discussion from a youth perspective. It analyses the often quite abstract ideas of sustainable well-being and sustainable future in relation to the everyday lives and engagements of young people, thereby highlighting sustainability as a youth question. Instead of individual features or achievements, we

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understand well-being in terms of the universalistic basic needs of human beings and the entire planet (for it is not only humans who have needs or "agency"; see Bennett 2010) and regard satisfying these needs as the key responsibility of societies (Gough 2017). We highlight meaningful participation in society as one of the fundamental needs, and as such, tightly entangled with the question of well-being. The book's mission, which is to encourage young people to be actively involved in discussions of sustainable well-being, stems from our own and other researchers' empirical observations: current local and global developments alarm many young people in terms of how these developments relate to their everyday lives and futures (e.g., Hickman et al., 2021; Hussen 2018; Pekkarinen & Myllyniemi 2019). For example, recent youth protests on climate change have been motivated by young people's strong sense of injustice, feeling of being deprived of a decent future and a perception of betrayal by their governments (Kippenberg & Rall 2021; Taft 2020; Thunberg 2019; youth4climatejustice 2021; see also Chapters 1 and 7). Even if not all young people engage in protests or regard themselves as activists, many see the future as important because it encompasses their wishes, dreams, fears and uncertainties (Cahill & Cook 2020; Franceschelli & Keating 2018; Honkatukia & Lähde 2020; Nikula, Järvinen & Laiho 2020).

The book's perspective builds on previous research findings that both highlight young people's elevated interest in influencing their futures while simultaneously documenting the minimal support they receive from the existing models, structures and means of participation (Cuevas-Parra 2021; Dentith, Measor & O'Malley 2012; Ergler & Wood 2015; Han & Wuk 2020; Walther et al., 2020). Several studies have demonstrated how young people's voices remain unheard or ignored in decision-making processes and how their participation often tends to be merely tokenistic (Hart 1992; Cammaerts et al., 2016). Moreover, young people's engagements with society are more often informal and mundane than formal (Barrett & Pachi 2019; Bowman 2020; García-Albacete 2014; Pickard & Bessant 2018). Hence, they tend to remain hidden, unacknowledged or misunderstood in adult-centred visions and discussions (Hearn 2018; Kallio, Wood & Häkli 2020; Shefer et al., 2018). Consequently, young people often feel unappreciated or undervalued as citizens and lack the opportunities to bring forth their views.

Young People as Agents of Sustainable Society analyses in depth this discrepancy between young people's interests and the structures of youth participation. We present insights and findings from collaborative empirical fieldwork processes with young people and professionals. These processes were conducted under the auspices of the extensive ALL-YOUTH research project that was carried out in Finland, where we have studied and sought to inspire young people's societal participation, intergenerational dialogue and, ultimately, intergenerational justice (Meyer 2016; Percy-Smith & Burns 2013). With intergenerational justice we refer in the context of our studies to the rights of young people for sustainable, healthy and safe (social and ecological) environment now and in the future, and the subsequent duty of the adult society to take these rights seriously, responding to them with effective policies. Overall, the scope of our interest in the book is extensive. We examine the opportunities, conditions and policies of youth participation in various contexts and stages of young people's lives, encompassing, among others, life courses towards independence and transitions to working life; participation in legislation; experiences of digital participation; belonging to or exclusion from (mainstream) society; relationship to nature; and young people's thoughts and expectations about the future, especially in relation to the climate crisis. In each context, we ask how young people see themselves as societal actors, including their opportunities to influence decision making about the matters in their lives and future.

In studying young people's societal participation, we regard it as being critical to acknowledge youth as perhaps the most dynamic life phase in the human life course, during which one's social, material and societal positions significantly fluctuate (Chesters et al., 2019; Bynner 2006; Worth 2009). In ALL-YOUTH, we have understood this life phase to fall mainly between the ages of 16 and 25, but there are also exceptions depending on the context of each study. Going through youth is a period for growing physically and mentally, forming intimate and other social relationships outside of a childhood family and adapting to independent living. Being young often means reflecting on and developing a sense of oneself as a part of communities and society and making decisions that shape one's future life in significant ways. Moreover, young people's relationship with society is defined by societal power relations and inequalities, here related to, in addition to age, their race, class, gender, sexuality, class, ability or other features. These categories mutually shape one another and modify young people's life phases differently in various situations and contexts (Hill Collins & Bilge 2020, 2). Young people can experience this dynamic and complex life phase in their respective societal positions with excitement, dreams and joy, and they can engage avidly in planning for their future (Arnett 2000). Simultaneously, regardless of their backgrounds, many foster difficult emotions and insecurity related to making important life-altering decisions in an overwhelmingly uncertain world (e.g., Furlong 2009; Madsen 2021). Young people might be insecure about their desired future society, and their plans might come off as tentative and disjointed. However, this does not mean that they lack ideas or that their in-a-state-of-becoming viewpoints should be bypassed. In adult-centred accounts, young people's sometimes abrupt propositions risk being unnoticed, ignored or dismissed, leaving concepts such as sustainable future detached from young people's realities.

The principal objective of this book is to establish a firmer connection between the discussions of youth participation and well-being. Although we find it essential to highlight how young people are positioned in society through policies, institutional practices, public discourses and research, we argue that previous research has not focused enough on how youth participation is linked to the experience of well-being. Consequently, young people's participation is often bypassed or misinterpreted as apolitical or passive, immature, narcissistic, self-motivated and individualistic type of nonengagement (we will return to this claim later; see also Pickard & Bessant 2018). We interpret this as a sign of a clear gap in the research, despite the growing literature on both themes.

When considering the relationship between participation and well-being, it is essential to note that adult society often sets stringent requirements for young people, who are going through their unique process of navigating towards adulthood and striving for a good life and well-being (McLeod & Wright 2015). In addition to the expectations that they are supposed to follow, including the normative path from school to education and working life, they are surrounded by other ageist and adult-centred demands concerning the "proper" ways of being active in society (Ikonen & Nikunen 2019; Wyn, Cuervo & Landstedt 2015; see also Chapters 4 and 5). Plenty of sources discuss how young persons placed on the "wrong side" are managed by various activation and other policy measures of "a transition machinery" (Brunila & Lundahl 2020; Helne & Hirvilammi 2021; Kallinen & Häikiö 2020). In this book, we particularly contribute to the research tradition interested in what ideals and norms mean at the everyday level of young people and through which processes these ideals and norms produce inequalities between those who are seen to represent the right kind of youth participation and agency and those relegated to a category of (self)excluded, passive, different or even deviant (e.g., Maira 2009; Scanlon 2015; Yuval-Davis 2006; Willis 1993/2014). Our fieldwork vividly documents these processes, as well as young people's agency in responding to the labels assigned to them.

In discussing the nexus of youth participation and well-being in the research context, we have also found it indispensable to stay alert to what kind of discourses on youth we as adults, researchers and scholars engage in and contribute to and whose interests these discourses defend (Cahill 2015; Wyn 2015; see also Chapter 4). In this respect, the book participates in critical youth research discussions (e.g., Kelly & Kamp 2017) to deconstruct the participation-related prejudices and assumptions with which adult society targets youth and which are still often uncritically reproduced in youth policies and academic research (Hartung 2017; Rytioja & Kallio 2018). In this, we wish to contribute to the discussion of what Hearn (2018, 47) has referred to as "critical studies of adults and adulthood" (CRAS) as a way to make visible how the common framings of young people tend to produce adults as authoritative actors in ways that leave them outside of the critical eye in "absent presence", whereby adulthood is obvious but left unmarked (see also Haynes & Murris 2017). We seek to respond to this challenge, even if tentatively, engaging in critical reflection of our own identity and agency in the fieldwork practices and in participating in public debates on the question of youth.

We begin this introductory chapter by identifying our position in the muddled field of discussion on youth participation. We argue why we have chosen the concept of societal participation to describe youth agency in society and describe the two vital sensitising strategies we have selected: seeing youth societal participation as firmly embedded in their everyday lives and as a form of reflexive politics. Thereafter, we traverse through the extensive debates on youth well-being attempting to find an agreeable space where young people's societal participation could be analysed in close connection with the ideas of sustainable well-being, the key conceptualisations of which have greatly inspired our thinking (Gough 2017; Helne 2021; Helne & Hirvilammi 2017; Hirvilammi & Helne 2014). After formulating our position at the crossroads of debates concerning participation and well-being, we describe the methodological starting points of the book.

Before starting, we would like to make an important note: this Introduction is based firmly on the experiences from the ALL-YOUTH project, but it is also the result of the editors' creative thinking and is not intended to represent the views of all authors. The chapters of the book analyse young people's societal participation from various angles and share an interest in the question of sustainable well-being, even when not all authors address the concept directly. As editors, we have familiarised ourselves meticulously with the discussion of each chapter, bringing together their key themes, ideas and concepts in an attempt to construct a more consistent argument about what we think is amiss in the existing conceptualisations of young people's relationship to society.

Towards a relational understanding of young people's societal participation

When entering research debates on youth participation, one inevitably steps into an already crowded space. Two reasons can be seen as the root causes for this: one is that the concept of citizen participation has a long history in democratic studies, and the other is that the discourse on active citizenship has turned into mainstream thinking, which occupies a great space in policy programmes (Dacombe 2018; Hilmer 2010; Motti-Stefanidia & Cicognani 2018; Walther et al., 2020). Moreover, regarding young people, the vastly growing interest in youth participation can be attributed to the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, which has popularised the notion of citizenship as a fundamental human right for both adults and children. There is now widespread principled recognition among nations, politicians and researchers that children and youth are active members of their communities and that their voices should be heard (Ergler & Wood 2015; Smith 2015). However, despite the abundance of talk about participation, its meaning remains surprisingly unclear, as many scholars have lamented (Theocharis & van Deth 2018; Weiss 2020). Later in this chapter, we will encounter the same critique of the concept of well-being.

To start with, the notion of participation has been traditionally used to describe citizens' contribution to the use of public power in a democratic community, either at the state, regional, local or neighbourhood level (Birch 1993, 80–94). In this context, studies on participation have been interested in questions such as the following: To what extent and how can citizens take part in and influence political decision making over common affairs? Are citizens interested in politics? How active and engaged are they? Do they vote? Do they value democracy and democratic institutions? How much active participation does democracy need to be considered legitimate? Concerning youth participation, many studies have focused on young people's declining interest in politics through traditional institutions and to the (new) manifestations of their engagement with society (Barrett & Pachi 2019; Bowman 2020; O'Toole 2015). It is also acknowledged that an extensive part of young people's participation may remain unnoticed by adults (O'Toole et al., 2003; Pickard & Bessant 2018).

Especially in the context of new social movement studies, research has shown interest in the forms of participation and activism that occur outside institutionalised processes. These forms and styles have been multifariously addressed as extra-parliamentary politics, political mobilisations, social, political and protest movements, grassroots actions, self-organised activism and so on (van Deth 2014; see discussion in Weiss 2020). Here, the relationship between participation inside and outside institutions has always been notably tense. Political authorities like to keep a close eye on the politics and movements evolving in civil society, observing whether they pose a real or imagined challenge to the prevailing institutions (Rosanvallon 2008). Recently, this phenomenon has concerned young activists who have been struggling to advocate for rapid climate measures and who have been faced with adult critique and even, at times, violent countermeasures (e.g., Bergman & Ossewaarde 2020), as well as young people who resist the discriminatory practices related to race, gender and sexuality (e.g., Shefer et al., 2018). It is important to note here that scholars, too, contribute to the (re)production of such system-oriented discourses with their research results and policy recommendations. For example, this is reflected in the research on youth participation, regularly surveying young people's values and attitudes towards the prevailing political institutions, monitoring their potential discontent and its implications for the system and, hence, bypassing other forms of agency in society (Bowman 2019; Rytioja & Kallio 2018).

Although traditional priorities and conceptualisations are still in place in democratic studies, more recently, the research on youth participation has expanded to cover not only young people's relationship to traditional politics, but also their relationship to society more widely. Scholars have problematised the concept of politics for its overidentification with the political system, which narrows down the meaning of participation to citizens' involvement in decision-making processes (Isin & Nielsen 2008; Plummer 2003). In this manner, many other forms of social and political engagement have been left unnoticed or unaccounted for. Some scholars on youth participation have taken a critical stand on this deficiency and sought to broaden the definition of politics and participation to include a wider scope of activities, spheres of life and styles of influencing (e.g., Aggleton et al., 2019; Harris, Wyn & Younes 2007; Rytioja & Kallio 2018; Theocharis & van Deth 2018; see also Kallio, Mills & Skelton 2015).

Working with this broader understanding of participation, our starting point in ***Young People as Agents of Sustainable Society*** is the need to boost the visibility of young people's diverse engagements in society and involve their views more decisively in making society more sustainable. This goal requires a sensitive approach to the complex and evolving nature and heterogeneity of young people's agency, which challenges some of the key assumptions in knowledge production about young people's relationship with society. In society's adult-centred epistemological models, where it is the (white, autonomous, male, able-bodied, heterosexual) grown-up "who is positioned in charge of meaning and knowledge and authorised to set the rules of criticality" (Haynes & Murris 2017, 972), young people are thought of as special kinds of incomplete human beings and as citizens-in-the-making instead of as complete persons and citizens in their own right (e.g., Worth 2009). Young people are often recounted instrumentally, not as valuable or noteworthy in themselves, but as raw material for society's reproduction. Consequently, young people's everyday life experiences, concerns and knowledge are overlooked in societal discussions. Even if institutional practices have been developed to better enable young people's participation in decision making, for example, from the perspective of young people, these practices tend to remain tokenistic. Here, the societal discourse on youth and youth participation has a long way to go in learning from critical youth and education studies' reconceptualisations of young people's citizenship as being capable and holding age-independent agency (cf. the argument about "agelessness" by Haynes & Murris 2017, 975–977).

Another problem with the adult-centred imagery of young people's societal participation is that it typically perceives it in binary terms (Bowman 2019, 2020), which obscures the complexities of young people's participation, hence hiding their many forms of involvement in society. The adult-centred frame makes it difficult for young people to view their actions in diverse institutional contexts or among their peers as societally meaningful or political (O'Toole et al., 2003; Weiss 2020). Moreover, it reproduces and reinforces the hegemonic vulnerability narratives that position young people in binding ways as either vulnerable victims (Brunila and Lundahl 2020) or democratically passive "prosocial and conformist" transitional citizens (e.g., Boldt 2021; Wyn, Cuervo & Landstedt 2015; see also Chapter 5). This approach relates to youth participation as a mode of neoliberal governance, forcing young people to advance individual life chances in the context of more or less compulsory forms of societal participation and engagement (Hartung 2017; Helne & Hirvilammi 2021; Ikonen & Nikunen 2019; see also Chapter 4). When young people challenge these expectations, as they frequently do, they risk being labelled as passive, disinterested, disillusioned, disengaged, naive, defiant or even deviant (see Chapter 5). Consequently, many are left with the feeling that their existence and voices are largely bypassed or are being labelled inadequate by adult society.

The approach and concepts developed in this book veer away from this kind of understanding and sanctioning of young people's participation. Although young people's possibilities to influence politics is an important topic that will be addressed, we go beyond the familiar usage of political participation as engagement in an activity that is purposefully oriented to take part in and influence institutional decision making. We prefer the concept of *societal participation*, which can be understood more widely as inclusion, engagement, activity and influencing in the everyday surroundings and networks in which young people live and act (Harris, Wyn & Younes 2007; Isin 2008; Kallio, Wood & Häkli 2020). In this approach, no artificial distinctions are made between which activities and actions are counted as political and those that are not (as in "civic" activity). Rather, our approach works to counter the tendency to predetermine what participation can mean in research settings and public policies (cf. Barrett & Pachi 2019).

The above discussion reveals that the ways in which participation is defined in research and public discourses build a complex discursive field in which the scholars of youth participation must orient with a less-than-perfect conceptual guide in hand (see Weiss 2020; cf. van Deth 2014). Acknowledging this conceptual abyss and responding to it in this book, our approach to young people's societal participation starts with two initial characterisations. *First, our definition of participation relies on a broad and relational understanding of how it is embedded in young people's everyday lives.* Broadness implies that we are interested in studying the variety of ways young people are linked to society and act in it; this also motivates our use of the term societal participation. By relationality, we mean that participation always rests on a mix of social, political, cultural and, in the final analysis, ecological and planetary conditions. The need for this kind of conceptualisation can be justified empirically, especially given how significantly the current climate crisis and other environmental problems, coupled with other crises and problems related to social justice, motivate and frame young people's activity. In this way, the issue of youth participation cannot be sensibly separated from the wider socio-political-ecological context.

It is important to note that societal participation is primarily an analytical category in our conceptual framework. It does not entail any normative thrusting of young people into a certain kind of active citizenship. Neither is our intention to cluster them as active versus passive subjects or to label their citizenship as somehow problematic and in need of management by adult society. Instead, our conceptual framework consciously keeps open how young people's belonging, functioning and influencing in society are manifested in each time and context, here concentrating on the meanings young people assign to their participation.

Second, we find it helpful to define the nature of young people's societal participation in terms of reflexive politics theory. As Rinne (2011, 9) first introduced, the notion of reflexive politics is based on the observation that political activity has diversified and become ever more fragmented over the past few decades. At the same time, the motives and forms of political activity have individualised, so prominent political themes today often arise from individuals' initiatives and bottom-up mobilisations. The term "reflexive" expresses two aspects of this process of politicisation: the initial (reflexive) reaction to a grievance experienced in one's lifeworld and the reflective political judgement that follows the reaction and determines what measures a person will take to address the problem (Rinne 2011, 11; see also the discussion in O'Toole 2015).

From the perspective of postmodern theory, reflexive politics can be read as an alternative to the logic of traditional politics, which has become increasingly market driven and designs public policies in the interest of guaranteeing the economy's competitiveness. Instead of building upon mainstream politics' focus on economic efficiency, competitiveness and scarce resources, reflexive politics brings up personal experiences, such as environmental values, the personal experiences of infringements of sexual integrity or other injustices related to the expression of gender or sexuality and related self-organising forms of citizenship (Rinne 2011, 10; Tormey 2015). At its best, reflexive politics initiates alternative ways of seeing the world, including critical insights into how traditional politics excludes most people from the sphere of political influence. Meanwhile, it can cause friction between civil society and traditional institutions, especially if reflexive mobilisations are interpreted in the framework of protest politics. The different logic and unpredictability of reflexive action and its prolific and imaginative use of performative communication are often met with suspicion and opposing reactions from political authorities.

The theory of reflexive politics aids in interpreting young people's societal participation and bottom-up movements, such as climate activism, Black Lives Matter or youth-initiated social media campaigns inspired by the #MeToo movement (see, e.g., Hussen 2018). For example, Fridays for Future was born out of a single person's privately felt anxiety over the climate and grew into a global movement of thousands of young people who shared the same feeling. Another example is the well-known climate change case brought to the European Court of Human Rights by six young Portuguese activists (see Chapter 1), which stemmed from their frightening personal experiences of forest fires near their homes, the causes of which have been linked to the process of global warming (youth4climatejustice 2021). In fact, dozens of similar court cases have been made in collaboration between young people, lawyers and other adults worldwide (Sahin 2020; see contributions to Henry, Rockström & Stern 2020). Based on these examples and many more, some of which we have encountered in our fieldwork, the theory of reflexive politics works as a valuable tool, helping to clarify our basic argument: young people's participation should be seen as embedded in their everyday lives and connected with an overall framework of well-being, which is affected by the surrounding social structures, public policies and, in the final analysis, the ecological conditions of life on the planet.

Well-being – everything and nothing?

We aim to analyse young people's societal participation, as defined above, in connection with the conceptualisations of well-being. We develop the argument that young people's participation should be understood holistically and take into account the complex ways in which participation is embedded in their needs and well-being (White 2010). As with the concept of participation, well-being is understood in an encompassing sense, recognising that, ultimately, it is based on the well-being of the whole planet. We agree with Helne and Hirvilammi's (2017, 2021; Helne, Hirvilammi & Alhanen 2014) argument that the question of sustainable well-being cannot be reasonably separated from the broader social, economic, political and ecological context. Our perspective greatly benefits from their theory of sustainable well-being as a deeply relational phenomenon, and it is also inspired by posthumanist thinking, which locates "the posthuman subject" in deep relationality to its fellow non-human species and entities (Braidotti 2013; van der Zaag 2016, 333). We contend that the conception of well-being based on material wealth needs to be challenged because it has severe ecological and social consequences and threatens both the viability of the planet and human well-being.

To start, when thinking about how youth is imagined and articulated in contemporary society, one cannot help but notice the significant role that the discussions on well-being play in defining youth and their agency (Wyn 2015). McLeod and Wright (2015, 1) point out that improving one's well-being is now suggested as a solution to the myriad of issues that young people face; calls to address well-being are so commonplace and widespread that "they can mean both everything and nothing". Also, other researchers have commented on the difficulties in defining the idea and concept of well-being in any satisfactory way (Bourke & Geldens 2007; Dodge et al., 2012; see discussion in Cahill 2015).

Although the concept of well-being may seem vague and serve diverse purposes, it is still significant for two critical reasons: one is that it is used extensively as a managing technology in the lives of young people, and the other is that it is an important philosophical idea, continuing and rearticulating the more traditional notion of the good life. For example, Helne (2021, 223; also White 2010) notes that the concept of well-being is positively charged (who could object to pursuing well-being?), inclusive (undoubtedly relevant for all people, regardless of social position), holistic (referring to a bundle of mental, physical, material and social dimensions of being and feeling well) and aspirational. On this positive side, Helne (2021, 223) argues:

> Well-being is something people or societies aspire to, and achieving well-being may even be the strongest source of motivation for human action. Well-being is, then, not only an outcome of something but also a force of action and change, both on the personal and the social level.

For the purposes of our argument, it is relevant to note that well-being also constitutes a discursive nexus through which future-related dreams and fears meet and through which it is possible to conduct critical debates on the predicaments of the human condition today and in the future. Young people are increasingly troubled by what could happen to their well-being because of the ongoing eco-social crisis, conflicts and political upheavals around the world. How can the unequal distribution of well-being be remedied within populations, as well as globally, and is there a political will to do so? Do young people have to give up something of their well-being today to "save" it for future generations? What are their opportunities to take part in decision making concerning futures policies, thereby contributing to building sustainable well-being in the longer term?

These constitute some of the crucial debates in which young people have recently risen to prominent roles because they have called for swift action and intergenerational justice in the current intersecting crises (Han & Wuk 2020; Meyer 2016; Skillington 2019; Zabern & Tulloch 2021). At the same time, young people's fervent engagement and commitment to the local and global climate and social justice movements constitute an excellent example of what we want to discuss in this book. Young people's activism(s) can prove how their participation connects with broader societal issues and developments. As we have already pointed out, one of our key arguments is that youth participation should be approached contextually to understand how young people's basic needs are embedded in the conditions defining their everyday lives and how the fulfilment of their needs appears seriously hampered by the concern over their future horizons. Many contemporary social-political-ecological issues directly affect young people and their futures, and many young people are taking a firm public stance on them. In terms of this book, young people's participation is both *reflexive* and *reflective*, responding to the felt injustices around them and taking deliberate action when adult society fails to do so.

For this Introduction, we have explored how the concepts of youth societal participation and well-being are constructed within various research approaches and public discourses, along with how young people can and do contribute to these discussions. Hence, we next examine some relevant strategies and discourses for developing the book's arguments. The following discussion advances in several stages. Through each stage, we first raise key questions about how young people's well-being is defined and then discuss the related theoretical ideas that have informed, inspired and sometimes troubled the authors of this book.

Managing young people's well-being

Let us start with the following quandary. Cahill (2015, 95–96) aligns with critical youth researchers in the observation that increasing attention in society is attributed to the "problem" of young people's physical, mental, social, material and civic health, even though young people are the population group least likely to experience the burden of disease. In contemporary political, cultural and expert discussions, young people are regularly viewed in terms of their "risk status", whether at risk and in need of protection or prone to engage in risk-taking and, hence, in need of control or education (Besley 2010; Giroux 2000; Kelly 2006). Along with many other researchers (e.g., Wyn, Cuervo & Landstedt 2015), Cahill (2015) points out that the focus on the attainment of well-being is increasingly idealised and individualised, and it has become a catchall descriptor conjuring notions of young people's "successful" transition to adulthood and full citizenship, which has been defined especially in terms of participation in the labour market (Ågren 2021; see also Chapter 4). In this discourse, there is a tendency to talk about the problems of well-being as if they were psychological or developmental shortcomings rather than problems that come about as the result of social or political processes.

Consequently, there has been a loss of focus on the multiple dimensions of young people's lives with an accompanying lack of attention to how class, gender, race, ability, location and culture shape or moderate their life experiences (Cahill 2015, 100–102).

It is important to reflect on why this keen concern with young people's well-being exists, if they are, in fact, much better situated health-wise than other population groups. What purposes does this worry discourse serve, and how does it impact young people's lives (see e.g., Suni & Mietola 2021)? By asking such questions our intention is not to imply the absence of real problems with the well-being of young people, but rather, the aim is to become sensitised to the reality that studying and policing young people's well-being is by far an innocuous activity but involves designated political, research political and economic interests. Indeed, many critics have claimed that approaching youth well-being as a problem (McLeod & Wright 2015) specifically has to do with the rapidly evolving demands of the neoliberal economy and changes in the labour market to which governments around the world have responded favourably by developing "activation policies" (see Chapters 4 and 5). These have been targeted primarily at young people, aiming to improve their capacities for employability and prevent them from dropping out of society's reach (Brunila, Mertanen & Mononen-Batista Costa 2020; Ikonen & Nikunen 2019; Kelly 2006). The "project of the self" that young people are forced to take up to cope in this kind of economised society revolves around constant self-management and self-surveillance against the "codes of success" that institutions provide (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Brunila & Lundahl 2020; Wyn & Cuervo & Landstedt 2015). At the same time, the management of young people through, for example, education and career guidance is seen as providing a solution to the various social problems identified in their lives. However, according to our and other researchers' findings, some young people experience the activation measures and demands involved as the core causes for their ill-being (Honkatukia et al., 2020).

When the neoliberal-style economisation of society and states' activation policies are linked with the overall atmosphere of contingency and uncertainty inherent in contemporary society, we can begin to understand the social and political complexities within which young people orient their lives and see the implications this has for their well-being. For example, Kelly (2001, 2006) has argued that in late modernity young people are prompted to develop an entrepreneurial, reflexive subjectivity that signals their acceptance of responsibility for navigating the risks created by social change (see also Besley 2010). This is reflected, for example, in how young people are held accountable for their own employment and unemployment situations, even though the latter often stems from structural and global developments (Brunila, Mertanen & Mononen-Batista Costa 2020; Chesters et al., 2019; Scanlon 2015; see also Chapter 5). Thus, the problems of the individual "at risk" are taken as self-inflicted, while society itself is perceived to function correctly and normally.

As researchers who are interested in how young people perceive their lives, it does not feel particularly uplifting for us to take part in a discourse that, in some ways, exploits young people as the material of the changing economy and labour market. It seems evident that when the activation discourse mainly serves the interests of the economy and government policies, it does not leave space for young people's understanding of the question of well-being, hence easily ignoring their real needs. In this book, we have therefore wanted to take a different approach. In the studies we report, we focus on young people from perspectives that take seriously their own views and experiences and support their well-being. Despite this, we cannot ignore the neoliberal discourse because it comes with productive power that hits young people's lives, penetrating directly and indirectly into their minds and bodies, as well as into their social relations and relationships with society. Therefore, it is imperative to continue to struggle with the discourse and its entangled mechanisms of governmentality, to critically deconstruct how we understand young people and their relationship with society. Many of the book's authors do this as well.

Youth well-being – subjective experience or objective capabilities?

Moving on, it should be apparent that youth well-being has become not only a commodity-producing industry but also an instrument of political struggle, governance and economic competition. With their knowledge production and policy recommendations, scholars on young people's well-being are also involved in this mix. In research, numerous schemata and indices have been developed for the needs of this political-commercial-scientific industry, in which the well-being of young people has been broken down into detailed components which intend to measure the status of their physical, mental, emotional, affective and social health (e.g., OECD 2022; van der Deijl 2017; Huppert & So 2013). Of course, there is nothing wrong with approaching youth well-being in this manner, that is, as a multidimensional compound and with the intent of helping young people cope in life. However, it is intriguing to note that if we combine the empirical results of years of meticulous research based on both surveys and qualitative data, one finding surpasses the others: well-being, whether articulated in the language of "happiness" or "satisfaction of needs", depends mostly on a young person's relational experience of being accepted by others, of belonging to a valued group as a respected member and of being loved, cared for and supported by significant others (e.g., Daley, Phipps & Branscombe 2018; Jose, Ryan & Pryor 2012; Marksteiner, Janson & Beissert 2021; Montague & Eiroa-Orosa 2017). This is what we know for certain. Other qualities of well-being, be they material or something else, are of secondary influence (apart from meeting the basic needs necessary for survival). However, many scholars find this state of knowledge unsatisfactory, which prompts the following question: what is it that we cannot learn about the constitution of young people's well-being by asking them directly in surveys and interviews?

Here, we enter another debate that has framed the studies on youth well-being: the one between subjective and objective approaches. Subjective approaches have been criticised for not covering all the social, economic and political determinants of well-being as based only on people's own assessment of it. For example, Clark and Eisenhuth (2010, 70) point out that curtailing justice for young people to subjective well-being wrongly assumes that they can fully ascertain how their own life situation is embedded in the social structure. Clark and Eisenhuth warn that such an assumption may end up romanticising the agency of young people and forgetting that people adapt their preferences and future aspirations to how they are currently doing in life. Nussbaum (2007, 73) has famously argued that focusing on subjective well-being runs the risk of perpetuating social inequality: "It is not enough to ask people what they need to give them a democratic voice". Rather, what people utter as needs should always be analysed as being embedded in social structures. Their life situations, aspirations and values are not simply an outcome or within the responsibility of individual preferences and abilities (Moensted 2021; Wexler & Eglinton 2015).

Therefore, from this perspective, thinking critically about well-being requires non-subjective, general and global criteria that allow us to assess whether attaining well-being is truly and practically possible for all people without compromising social justice. This is what Martha Nussbaum has set out to accomplish in her Capabilities Approach (CA). In CA, well-being is understood in terms of the individual capacities and existing opportunities in society to act on them. The premise of CA is that all individuals are equally valuable and should therefore have equal opportunities to function in society to realise their human nature and personal aspirations, regardless of whether they (are able to) contribute anything to society (Clark & Eisenhuth 2010; Nussbaum 2007, 66). Nussbaum has identified a set of qualities that she believes represent the universal conditions for a good life. These include both economic goods and fundamental rights and liberties, which are bound together with the notion of human dignity (Nussbaum 2016, 173). One of CA's key purposes is to offer a critical yardstick for assessing whether such free agency is possible and the obstacles in society that may stand in its way. Subsequently, the equity of well-being requires that when capabilities are hampered by personal, social or structural problems, they should be addressed through a range of social policies (Hamilton & Redmond 2010; Ziegler 2010).

CA has the potential to study youth well-being. Often, young people are left to struggle (alone) within the complex mix of policies, norms and pressures imposed on them by society. Although CA can be criticised on various grounds, it still provides a potential counter-discourse to the approach that seeks to responsibilise young people for their own well-being individually. CA helps to shift the focus away from what young people seem to be doing "wrong" in their life paths and transitions towards a critical assessment of the real capabilities provided for young people to live a meaningful life (Brunila & Lundahl 2020; Ziegler 2010). This approach obliges us to ask whether real opportunities for young people to self-actualise exist and, if structural barriers are hampering their aspirations, what should be done about these barriers. If young persons are unable to "converse" their freedom to "functionings" on equal terms with others, what kind of support should be provided to remedy their missing chances?

Although CA clearly hints at the possibility of critically taking up the question of the relationship between today's well-being capabilities and those of future generations, it does not truly expound on that discussion. Yet, we believe that this is exactly what we need to do to follow young people where they are going, with their worries over the current crises and their repercussions to their future (Hickman et al., 2021).

Towards a needs-based understanding of young people's well-being

Based on the previous critical discussion, there are good reasons to move the argument still forward to the question on human needs and conditions of sustainable well-being. Namely, although CA does not use the language of needs, the core set of universal capabilities suggested by Nussbaum can be read as articulating the basic needs of an individual living among others. A needs perspective is essential because it helps to see young people's well-being as connected to the surrounding social, political, economic and cultural processes and ecological conditions. Discussing sustainable well-being also raises the question of how we should live and act in such a way that the conditions of well-being are maintained for future generations. Our argument is – and here we join Helne and Hirvilammi (2017, 2021), Gough (2017) and Matthies and Närhi (2017), among others – that thinking about well-being in terms of needs and sustainability is not simply a matter of an epistemic preference. What is at stake is a much more serious existential question in relation to which researchers and policymakers inevitably must position themselves. As Helne and Hirvilammi (2017, 37) put it,

> What humankind are facing today is not merely a social and economic crisis which threatens well-being but a crisis of our sense of humanity, how we understand our place in the world, and how we put this understanding into practice.

This statement has tremendous importance from the point of intergenerational justice when aiming to guarantee opportunities for youth to flourish, both now and in the future.

The starting point for sustainable well-being is the idea that needs are species specific and permanent. They traverse global contexts and time and concern both current and future generations, meaning that future generations will have the same needs as we do today (Gough 2017, 46). Needs should be met so that "people can avoid harm and be able to function – to pursue their own goals, participate in society and be aware of and reflect critically upon the conditions in which they find themselves" (Gough 2017, 62; see also Allardt 1993). Needs are to be separated from wants because needs are morally significant in such a way that individual preferences or wants are not. Needs both give significant rights to individuals and impose obligations on them, institutions and society itself.

In their discussion on the conditions of sustainable well-being, Helne and Hirvilammi (2021, 45–47) refer to the principle and ethos of strong relationality. Strong relationality points to the neediness and dependency of human beings, drawing attention to the vulnerability that is constitutive of all life forms. From a relational perspective, well-being depends on people's relationship to their community, society, nature and, ultimately, the whole universe. It is also connected to the time continuum, building on past and present conditions, as well as on the expectations of the future. In this thinking, a human being can no longer be conceptualised as self-centred *homo economicus*, but rather as *homo iunctus*, a being connected to everyone and everything around them (Helne & Hirvilammi 2021, 47; see Braidotti 2013, 2019, and Bennett 2010, for a posthuman and materialist articulation of this idea). Hence, even though needs are linked to individual psychological and spiritual well-being, the way they are realised is a thoroughly social, affective and material issue that is produced in the interplay between social, political, economic and cultural processes and dynamic engagements with the material environment (Atkinson 2013; Chapters 3 and 5).

Moreover, an emphasis on human neediness does not imply, as critics have suspected, that human agency and autonomy lose their meaning. On the contrary, it is our very neediness that makes us active (Helne & Hirvilammi 2017, 5). The notion of agency is the basis for needs-driven well-being simply because, as humans, we are always forwards-orienting actors who must work to survive (labour), create a meaningful life and things around us (work) and keep up the social and political world (act), to borrow Hannah Arendt's (1958) famous concepts. Societies do not hold up by themselves, and people cannot survive without the capability to function and act. These are the things we *need* to do, and according to an impressive body of social and political research, deliberately acting in and for the common world together with others has the tendency to make people happy (Borgonovi 2008; Lawton et al., 2021; see also Roodt 2014). Needs and relationality-based thinking have important implications for the study of youth well-being. Here, young people cannot be held individually responsible for their own destiny. Instead, their choices and transitions in life are an integral part of the processes of society as a whole, interlinked with the broader conditions and developments that underlie them. Thus, when, for example, policy discourses construct the differences between "active" and "marginalised" youth, the reality is that all are part of the same common world.

Young people's societal participation in the context of sustainable well-being

To recapitulate, we consider it essential to approach youth well-being from the perspective of needs because this allows us to have a deeper understanding of what young people's participation means and how it is embedded into the overall constitution of their well-being. It also helps to direct critical attention to the many barriers that obstruct youth participation. One of the central things we should understand is the following: when participation is understood in the context of well-being, it is unfair to expect that young people are “active”, as society usually defines it, if their basic needs are not met, like when they face difficulties in making their living, have problems in their social relations, feel excluded by and from society, experience uncertainties with their self-efficacy and so forth. Meanwhile, it should be remembered that the activities of young people are not always visible to the outside world, even if such activities might be critical to their well-being. As discussed earlier, youth participation takes on many different forms that adult observers do not always perceive or understand.

Furthermore, the opportunities and barriers to participation are not only structural and institutional; they are also discursively constructed. As Helne and Hirvilammi (2017, 36–37) argue, the importance of elaborating on the concept of well-being is based on the view that the language we use, the stories we tell ourselves and the concepts and metaphors we live by have an enormous effect on our behaviour. Consequently, they constitute considerable transformative power. Concepts do not merely exist, they *do* things and shape the world (Helne, Hirvilammi & Alhanen 2014). Likewise, how youth participation is seen and understood is influenced by the ways of speaking about it in political and research discourses. This has been well reflected in the recent climate debate. Many young people feel that they are not taken seriously in public discussions. Their anxiety over the planet’s future has motivated them to act, but they criticise how their worries are being treated as a problem itself (Eide & Kunelius 2021). Instead, what should be done is to take rapid action and effect social change to promote the required eco-social transition (see Chapter 7). Politics and policies in the right direction would ease young people’s minds, not (at least solely) counselling and therapy. Of course, not all young people are equally interested in or think in the same manner about such issues, and intersectional analyses are often more informative to understand the variety of positions they take in societal matters (Hill Collins & Bilge 2020). Yet from a relational perspective, the case remains that, in those conditions of social and ecological interdependence, the well-being of all young people is connected to the same socio-political-ecological system.

Needs and capabilities can be conceptually connected. CA raises critical questions about whether society provides those capabilities that meet the participation needs of young people and how the same capabilities can be secured for future generations. From this book’s perspective, it is interesting to note how young people themselves have powerfully raised such issues. Numerous young people around the globe have expressed the need and desire to contribute to public debates and political decision making about futures policies. Their experiences of participation in the debates on climate, environment, social justice and sustainable development vary, but the common sentiment among young activists is that they are not genuinely listened to. Rather, they are often patronised and positioned in the role of immature citizens-in-the-making. It is an essential question whether young participants and activists can create the space for a counter-discourse that would shift attention from "correcting" problems with youth well-being towards actually effective climate, environmental and social policies. An important related question is what kind of (supportive, critical or neutral) role the research on youth participation and well-being should play in such discourse. Again, these are not simply epistemological issues but ones that challenge us all to assess our relationship with the crises that threaten humanity and how we perceive young people's lives and agency in them. Our position in this book is that young people should be engaged widely and earnestly in creating policies for the future and sustainable well-being, while also taking their self-organising activism seriously. This requires a clear shift in both attitudes and democratic practices in adult society. Concomitantly, we must ensure that young people are not responsibilised individually for "saving the world". We need more, better and deeper interparty and intergenerational dialogue and cooperation to bring forward the necessary eco-social transition (see the discussion on this in Chapter 3).

The discussion in this Introduction has been motivated by how the category of "youth" is articulated in contemporary society and research. Our interest in the book especially lies in how the participation and well-being of young people are constructed within various research approaches and public policies. Our last argument is that, even in the midst of expanding literature, something important gets lost from the picture. It appears that research still has difficulty grasping and conceptualising the dynamics of young people's everyday lives and agency. Partly, the reason for this is that mainstream discourses tend to reproduce an understanding of youth participation and citizenship as if it were a separate sphere of activity detached from young people's everyday lives. Such a discourse implies that to participate young people should leave behind their own places, spaces and positions and go someplace else to carry out the actual participatory acts. The idea that societal participation requires leaving behind safe spaces and entering adult-controlled ones is frightening to many young people, hence serving as an effective barrier to their participation (see Chapter 6 for an elaboration on this question). Hence, this thinking creates a picture of the separateness of politics and society from everyday life, as many scholars working within critical citizenship studies have pointed out (e.g., Isin & Nielsen 2008). From a relational perspective of sustainable well-being, there is no separate world of participation (although there are institutions that have designated processes). Instead, as active human beings, we incessantly "participate" in the affairs of the common world. Responding to this and the other problems identified in the chapter, this book presents a more profound understanding of how young people's needs, participation, well-being, societal structures, culture, discourses and ecological conditions are intertwined in contemporary society.

Empirical context

Although the discussions throughout the book take part in international multidisciplinary debates, the geographical and societal context of our studies centres in Finland around our studies in the ALL-YOUTH research project. Next, we briefly describe a few central features of Finnish society and youth policies that have framed the work of ALL-YOUTH. Many of them will be discussed in more detail in the chapters that follow.

Finland (with a population of 5.5 million and geopolitical location in Northern Europe with c. 1,340-km-long border with Russia) is an interesting case for exploring youth participation because it regularly ranks at the top of the world, together with the other Nordic states, when evaluated through various indicators assessing the state of society. Finland is known, among other things, for its stable society, working multiparty democracy, universally guaranteed and affordable public services, high level of education and good level of gender equality (cf. Madsen 2021). Even though each of these features are actively debated and even questioned in the Finnish public and are partly countered by other features such as Finland being among the most racist and violent societies (especially against women) in Europe (FRA 2017), interestingly, in various international rankings, Finland systematically places among the top. To cite one internationally well-known longitudinal survey, Finland has been reported to be the world's "happiest nation" for five years in a row (World Happiness Report 2022) based, among other things, on respondents' perception of their own well-being and the opportunities to influence one's own life, in addition to other factors such as the level of gross national product, corruption, health and generosity among people.

In many ways, young people in Finland are also happy and doing well, yet well-being among youth seems to be becoming more unequal, and problems have piled up for some young people, as has been observed in other countries as well (Blackman & Rogers 2017; Cammaerts et al., 2016). For example, the number of young people outside of working life and education in Finland is approximately 50,000, comprising roughly 8% of the age group 15–24 (Statistics Finland 2021), compared with the average of 13% (of age group 15–29) in the EU (Eurostat 2022). However, the figure has gone down since the all-time high in 2015, primarily because of the government's strict "activation policies", which include a major reform of secondary education and placing new requirements for young people to seek employment to secure their unemployment benefits. Moreover, in 2021, the age of compulsory education was raised from 16 to 18 years, which is further expected to lower the number of young people at risk of becoming "marginalised" and to improve their integration into the labour market, thus impacting the youth unemployment rate, which currently figures at approximately 11% in the age group of 15–24 years. Meanwhile, recent reports from the public and NGO-based health service providers suggest that youth mental health and other health-related problems are on the rise, as are problems related to their social relationships, such as violence and sexual harassment, especially among certain groups of young people, including young women, racialised and gendered minorities and young people in care (Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare 2021). The impacts of these diverse developments and policies on young people's well-being are currently actively debated, with some discussants propounding that the discourse on marginalisation should be abandoned because of its stigmatising nature (e.g., Perttula 2015).

In terms of political participation, although Finland is a well-functioning democracy with a high rate of well-being, young people do not participate (as traditionally defined) more actively than in other countries. In fact, Finnish young people experience similar problems with their participation possibilities to young people in other countries. To cite a few developments, the voting activity of young Finns is lower than that of older generations, even if it has been picking up lately (Pirkkalainen & Husu 2020). For example, in the 2019 parliamentary election, the turnout in the age group 18–24 years was 55% (compared with 69% among all voters), which was higher than in the previous 2015 elections. According to the 2018 Youth Barometer, 15% of the respondents aged 15–29 years said that they have engaged in traditional forms of politics like voting, campaigning for candidates or being involved in a youth council (many of the respondents were under the voting age of 18, so the figure here is not representative of young adults' actual voting activity). In comparison, 45% of the respondents have sought to influence societal issues relevant to their lives in some other way. Both figures are on the rise, as is young people's pronounced interest in politics generally (Pekkarinen & Myllyniemi 2019, 27–32; cf. European Parliament Youth Survey 2021). However, despite such trends, a clear difference can be observed between the participation (especially voting activity) of young people in higher and lower socio-economic positions, a difference that has increased at an alarming rate in recent years (e.g., Lahtinen 2019). Gendered differences in societal participation can also be observed, with young women more inclined than young men to impact diverse societal issues (Fransberg et al., 2022). Moreover, one of the most peculiar characteristics of Finnish young people's relationship to politics is that their sense of civic competence (internal political efficacy) is considerably weaker than in other European countries (Kestilä-Kekkonen & Tiihonen 2022). According to surveys, most young people feel that they do not understand political issues sufficiently and do not know how they could act and influence society. These issues have consistently come up in ALL-YOUTH's studies as well. We do not, however, interpret these findings in terms of the dichotomies between active and passive or competent and incompetent young citizens, but instead, we look at the relationship of young people to society and their actions in it much more broadly, as will become apparent later. In this regard, the book presents several important and rarely discussed findings related to, for example, what kinds of ways and spaces of political activity young people feel are safe versus unsafe.

Even if the structures of youth participation have been well developed in Finland, Finnish young people often feel that decision makers do not listen to them, which corresponds to how many young people feel elsewhere as well. Officially, as can be expected, young people's participation is encouraged in public speeches, youth policy programmes and legislative measures, such as the 2017 Youth Act, which seeks to promote the social inclusion of young people and provide them with opportunities for exerting an influence and improve their skills and capabilities to function in society (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021). Moreover, young people's participation in decision making at the local level is expected to be enhanced by the 2015 Local Government Act, which states that every municipality must have a youth council or other participatory body for young people. However, as we have frequently witnessed, many young people feel that adult society is not genuinely interested in their views and contributions, especially if their views are critical. These experiences weaken young people's motivation for societal participation through official forms. Instead, as has been pointed out, they exercise their citizenship in other forms in their own daily lives, even if they are not always publicly recognised or appreciated (cf. the counterargument in Chapter 6).

The ALL-YOUTH project was established in this multifaceted societal context. It was inspired by the above-mentioned observation that, despite all the serious efforts to truly involve young people more firmly in societal decision making, many of them remain doubtful about their possibilities to be heard and have a say. We proposed a research project in which we would study and experiment on how to take young people's concerns and everyday lives seriously, encouraging them to participate in the formation of society on their own terms. We wanted to pay particular attention to those who are positioned in societal margins to create more possibilities for meaningful participation as who they are. From these underpinnings, we started our exceptionally interdisciplinary journey involving over 30 researchers from diverse disciplines and fields in 2018. Moreover, during the past few years, ALL-YOUTH has collaborated with hundreds of young people from diverse backgrounds. ALL-YOUTH has functioned as a broad umbrella under which several research teams have operated partly independently but at times collaborating intensively in fieldwork, data analysis and in reporting the findings. This kind of undertaking is extremely rare in the field of youth research, and collectively we felt it important to document our experiences to the wider international audience.

Methodological underpinnings: studying participation and well-being from a youth-centred perspective

In the studies discussed in the following chapters, we have developed a methodological approach to turn the conceptual underpinnings presented above into research practice. This means that we have regarded it important to analyse young people's relationship to society as a holistic, dynamic and relational process where researchers seriously consider young people's own views and meanings. *Holistic* here means that participation is an essential dimension of a person's being-in-the-world, which is intimately linked with other dimensions that make a person a physical, mental, social and political being; as such, participation is essentially related to human needs and sustainable well-being. By the attribute of *dynamic*, we refer to participation as situated and variable over time. This implies that different structural and societal conditions enable different forms and meanings of participation (and disable others). Finally, *relational* means that participation is not something a person can decide or choose to do completely by themselves. Instead, it is constructed in a complex and changing relationship to the relations in the cultural, economic and ecological spheres in which the person lives and shares with others.

For us, a central starting point in implementing these methodological foundations has been the genuine interest in young people’s worldviews in their everyday life contexts without predetermined agendas. We believe that, as experts on youth themselves, young people have important ideas and experiences of institutions (such as school, education or working life), of engaging in society and of imaginations of the future, if only adults are ready to listen to them (see Chapter 10). Demonstrating this kind of sincere interest towards young people requires not only the willingness but also a readiness to challenge the principles of the prevailing knowledge production paradigm, which is often based on categorising young people’s agency as apolitical, antipolitical or disengaged, if it does not fit into the adult-centred view of what is regarded as the right kind of societal activity (Ergler & Wood 2015; Rytioja & Kallio 2018; see also Chapters 4 and 6).

Our approach has been inspired by research examples that have succeeded in showing how young people can act meaningfully in collaboration with other generations on complex societal issues, hence producing important insights into what it means to live in uncertain social, political and environmental times (see Chapter 3). These participatory and experimental studies have shown that young people are not just vulnerable recipients of public policy measures or victims of the difficult circumstances surrounding them. Instead, they have unique perspectives and ideas of responses that can significantly contribute to the development of communities and societies (Helne & Hirvilammi 2021; see also Chapter 1).

We realised that this approach creates the need to move forward from presenting young people’s voices or merely documenting their agency or the perceived lack of it. First, it is vital to make young people’s commitment to forms of solidarity, care and intergenerational collaboration in their everyday surroundings and in a wider society more visible. Many young people well understand that they are not the only stakeholders; indeed, they are willing to make the world better alongside adults (Howard, Howell & Jamieson 2021; Trajber et al., 2019, 102). Second, action-based participatory methodologies have massive transformative potential, even if we can document only some of that power in this book. Experiences of collaborative undertakings can valorise the concrete aspects of inspiring citizen participation towards sustainability. One such model is presented by Ian Gough (2017, 48–50), a scholar in social policy, who has suggested a specific dual strategy to identify the “needs satisfiers” for universally definable basic needs, that is, what goods, services, activities and relationships are required to satisfy the needs in a given social context. According to him, this entails working together at various levels of decision making and with different forms of knowledge, such as expert knowledge of health and education, and experientially grounded knowledge based on people’s everyday lives and contexts. This is not a simple task and needs further development. In our studies, to cite one example, we have experimented with young people on a digital council prototype and reflected on their possibilities to be a part of such research and development initiatives (see Chapter 2).

In essence, our methodologies have been participatory and, on many occasions, explorative. Guided by our knowledge from earlier studies, we had some starting points in mind when we started the ALL-YOUTH project. As previously mentioned, we have wanted to listen attentively to young people's thoughts and learn about their own ways of expressing their experiences (Rättilä & Honkatukia 2021; Back 2007). To do so, the authors have implemented participatory research methods in various creative ways, with some mixing youth engagement with quantitative survey data, while others have been particularly inspired by the qualitative co-research methodology, taking as our critical insight the idea of forming as equal a relation to the research participants as possible instead of retaining an "objective" distance from them (Allaste & Tiidenberg 2015; Barber 2009; Mubeen & Tokola 2021; Smith 1987).

The nature of our collective research activities with young people (and professionals) can also be characterised as co-experimenting. This means that, in many of the studies discussed in the book, we started the process without a preset agenda with firm questions or research constellations. Instead, the process evolved through a discussion with the participants, probing what kind of research undertakings would be possible and meaningful from their perspectives (Percy-Smith & Burns 2013). Proceeding in this manner, ensuring that the participants felt good and safe about what we were doing, required flexibility and readiness to constantly reflect our research encounters also from the young people's point of view (Dentith, Measor & O'Malley 2012). Depending on the context, our joint journey continued in diverse directions. For example, with some young people, we formed research groups. In other cases, we visited their school classes regularly, and with some, we engaged in arts-based activities.

In our version of knowledge co-creation, we have been inspired by standpoint epistemology and the idea of strong objectivity as a form of responsible knowledge production (e.g., Harding 1986). Accordingly, we view that science, which openly acknowledges its interests, is less biased than knowledge production, which does not reflect its interests. Strong objectivity entails forceful reflexivity, "knowing about your knowing" (Harding 1993; Ronkainen 2000, 172). Besides reflexivity, it requires positioning from the researcher. Here, we line up with Suvi Ronkainen, a scholar specialising in research methods, who claims that:

> We can know something about the reality, but this knowledge is always local and part of the local system of knowledge, way of knowing and interests. If we want to become better knowers, know what we know and what are the limits of our knowing, we need to have courage to commit, position ourselves and settle.
> (Ronkainen 2000, 182, our translation; see also Chapter 9)

Moreover, we have been intrigued by Rosi Braidotti's (1994, 2013) idea of nomadic consciousness, where the posthuman knower-subject recognises, accepts and even values epistemological uncertainty, resisting assimilation into the dominant ways representation and seeking to converge in their knowing a multitude of perspectives from a variety of disciplines and walks of life. Many of our explorative, multidisciplinary research processes with young people have followed such epistemological nomadness, acknowledging that we know nothing about young people's lives to begin with and affirming that what we come to know evolves in a process of doing, acting, conversing, imagining and creating together (cf. Braidotti 2019).

Critical reflections from the field

Above we have presented the basic methodological starting points of our empirical fieldwork. In the chapters that follow, we also openly describe and reflect on the challenges we encountered in our experiments and fieldwork (see especially the chapters in Part III). Our plans did not always proceed as envisioned. We encountered various ethical dilemmas, misunderstandings, communication breaks, uncertainties and sometimes even situations that could be seen as failures (see Bradbury-Jones & Taylor 2015). While engaging in such a self-critique, we have attempted to keep in mind an important precept formulated by Kelly and Kamp (2017), regarding how researchers should reflect, besides the research process as such, on their imaginations of what they are doing with the research. Commenting on youth studies, in particular, they remind us that the field constantly struggles with constructing youth as "others", and this is not easy to overcome:

> [S]ocial science/youth studies ought to acknowledge that it stands, always, in some relation to Self-Other binaries […] there is a sense in which much of social scientific scholarship colludes […] in reproducing the poor and dysfunctional Other to a privileged (White) normal, rational, transcendental Subject.
>
> (Kelly & Kamp 2017, 257)

Kelly and Kamp continue to describe how youth research is commonly conducted by adults and how it is increasingly governmentalised and, therefore, always risks being adult centred, even if that is not the intention. Youth centredness can also be compromised because of the demands of the institutional contexts where research is done, here in universities and research institutions, where effectiveness in research output must be shown and fierce competition exists over research funding. Therefore, Kelly and Kemp ask researchers to be constantly alert to the question, "Whose dirty linen gets aired as a consequence of the work we do?" (Kelly & Kamp 2017, 530). According to them, critical youth research in the twenty-first century should have a critical ethos that constantly "troubles and unsettles what it is that we think we know, what we do, what we think when we say we are doing critical youth studies" (Kelly & Kamp 2017, 530; see also Dentith, Measor & O'Malley 2012).

In our experiments, we have attempted to follow Kelly and Kamp's advice, and it has not always been comfortable. Anticipating the discussions in the chapters to come, we next elaborate on some of our observations. First, we would like to put forth a fundamental dilemma in our inquiry, namely the question of how we, as researchers and young people as our collaborators, understood the concepts of youth participation and social inclusion. From the beginning, we have aimed to understand young people's societal participation broadly, and it has indeed been eye-opening to take notice of the many ways and arenas of participation that young people engage in their everyday lives. However, at the same time, the meaning of participation has not always been clear to our young collaborators or us. We have received diverse answers from young people when we have asked how they understand the concept and have also faced silence, gestures of inconvenience and confusion, as well as "I don't know" types of short answers.

Moreover, young people's research participation styles have varied considerably. We have witnessed active participants but also withdrawals, not showing up, bodily expressions of disinterest and occasional verbal resistance and joking, the meaning of which we did not always understand (see Chapter 10). It remains uncertain how these multiple and contingent forms of research participation should be interpreted. Despite sometimes being uncomfortable, our fieldwork experiences have broadened our ideas of what participation in research can mean. We have learned to accept that participation cannot be truly defined beforehand. Neither is it possible to formulate a conclusive definition after the fieldwork.

Second, we regard it as important to reflect on what counts as knowledge or knowing in our co-creative collaborations with young people. Our aim has been to learn new ways of how young people think about the future and their possibilities to impact it. This has been important for us from both the research ethics and quality of knowledge perspectives. At this point, however, we cannot be certain whether the knowledge we attempted to co-create is something new or what, in the end, was the meaning of our research collaboration in terms of knowledge. Neither do we know for sure whether our research participants felt that they had gained new knowledge or skills in and through our collaborations. It seems that no one identifiable body of knowledge was often formed, but instead, different forms of "knowings" emerged, the meaning(s) of which were unique and, hence, different for each participant (see Ergler & Wood 2015). Some issues learned during the processes appeared to be vital for participants, yet they were difficult to conceptualise in epistemological terms (see the argument on this point in Chapter 9).

Third, there is a need to reflect on what happened in our experimental attempts to disrupt the power differentials between researchers and research participants and the inequalities of the ownership of knowledge. Did we in fact succeed in approaching young people as experts in their own lives? In our co-research processes, we encountered many ethical and practical challenges. These included difficulties in discussing the vulnerabilities related to young people's societal positions openly with them or reporting the research findings together in case our interpretations differed, such as when young people with a refugee background in one of our processes tended to responsibilise themselves individually over their employability in the Finnish labour market, while we saw the main problem lying in the labour market's racialised and discriminatory practices (see Chapter 8).

Fourth, in conducting intensive collaborative work with young people, we experienced moments when the related research ethics, such as confidentiality, not harming the participants and anonymity, were problematised in the field and in reporting the research results. We wanted to stay open to young people's views and perceptions. Therefore, in our co-research experiments, we purposefully did not have a ready-made research plan, research questions or a research constellation at the outset. Instead, we wanted to plan the study together with the young research partners. This is what we did, but it did not occur without problems. Documenting the processes also included moments of uncertainty concerning, among other issues, whether we could use the photos or publish the names of the co-researchers. From the point of view of research ethics, the participants should normally remain anonymous, whereas from the copyright and moral ownership perspectives, they would be entitled to have their names published. We had to search for tailored solutions to these kinds of questions depending on each situation.

Fifth, this kind of participatory undertaking demands a critical evaluation of how we succeeded in bringing young people's voices and perspectives into the public discussion and decision making. It can be asked what giving voice really means. There is plenty of critical discussion in youth research on how naive the objective of representing young people's voices can be (see e.g., Ergler & Wood 2015; Hartung 2017). Citing again the earlier quotation from Kelly and Kamp (2017), one can ask whose dirty linen is aired in research while allegedly giving voice to young people. Ethical dilemmas play a role here, too. For example, what are the consequences of representing young people's accounts when they are, say, misogynist or racist? How should such accounts be represented or interpreted? Should they even be represented at all? What if bringing them to the public eye harms some of the parties involved in the research process? These are complex questions, and there are no definitive answers to them.

Finally, in representing young people's perspectives on their thoughts, dreams and concerns, we have broadened the repertoire of the usual publishing channels towards more popularised outlets. For a researcher, this kind of orientation means helping young people gain access to resources to guide them to act meaningfully in creating and communicating their visions in relevant decision-making circles (Matthies 2017, 321–322). To enable such access, we have collaborated with young people and artists (e.g., Rättilä & Honkatukia 2021). To name a few examples, we have written blog posts, created web pages, made podcasts and produced short films together to help make young people's stories visible.

We have also invited young people to our events as speakers. On one occasion, we wrote an open letter to a minister in the Finnish government based on the messages that young people wanted to convey. We have also organised a roundtable discussion with decision makers to discuss acute youth issues. Based on these accomplishments, we have successfully presented young people's perspectives to the public. In the end, however, it is difficult to articulate exactly what has been made "visible" in and through such encounters and who eventually benefits from these efforts.

Guidance for the reader

The structure of the book follows the argumentation described above, proceeding through addressing what kind of structures, discourses and practices of adult society condition and hamper young people's participation; how young people themselves perceive their opportunity to participate in society; and how the ALL-YOUTH project has attempted to meet these challenges by developing and researching new types of participation models that seriously take into consideration young people's own views and needs.

Following this logic, the book is divided into three sections and a total of 11 chapters. Each section begins with a short introduction to its basic themes and ideas, followed by a brief abstract of each chapter. The first section, "Structures and new models of youth participation", discusses the structures, institutions and public and research discourses that determine how youth participation is currently understood, governed and studied. From the beginning, the argument is put forth that the connections between young people's participation and overall well-being and needs are not properly understood or noted in research, not to mention probing into the conditions of building sustainable well-being and the crucial importance of intergenerational justice and intergenerational learning for it. Some authors also take up the critical question of what kind of normative orders, perceptions and expectations of young people's participation and citizenship the dominant, economy-driven discourse is built on, reminding us that "activating youth" is not an innocuous endeavour but rather that it serves the interests of some political order and produces certain kinds of consequences that hamper young people's well-being. On the other hand, the chapters also examine how young people themselves experience their opportunities to engage in society. Moreover, they describe some of the development work, new participation models and research carried out in ALL-YOUTH to seriously listen to young people's own views and needs, inviting them to participate in the production of knowledge about them.

The second section, "Critical views from the margins", continues the discussion started in the previous section by looking at how the existing public, political and research discourses position young people in relation to society. The chapters are especially interested in how young people relate and react to such categorisations, paying attention to how they strive to cope with society's norms, but also how they challenge and disrupt them with their own critical views and social movements. The three chapters in this section argue that the commonly applied binary perspectives in public and research discourses do not adequately describe the realities of young people's engagement with society. Through several empirical examples, the authors show that many young people are in fact very interested in societal matters and strive to create meaningful ways and spaces of action for themselves to get out of the marginalised positions in which society often places them.

The chapters in the third section, "To be(come) seen and heard – but how, and how to study it?", connect with the theme(s) of the second section. It especially focuses on the lives of young adults with a refugee background living in Finland, for whom the marginalising practices of society and intersecting processes of racialisation, ethnisisation and gendering are exposed in a particularly uncovered form, one that necessarily reflects on their well-being. It is with these young people that the interpretive power of the book's argument about the close linkage between participation and well-being is perhaps most clearly visible. The identity of refugee youth is fragile, and their basic needs are not sufficiently met, which also means that their overall well-being and ability to actively participate in society can be much weaker compared with many other young people. They suffer from the experience that they are not accepted into Finnish society, instead facing a lot of structural discrimination and everyday racism. Still, they are ready to talk about their lives, tell their personal stories and discuss societal issues, as the researchers discovered when they invited young refugee men and women to join in co-producing knowledge about their lives. The chapters of the section describe the used participatory co-research and arts-based methodologies, highlighting their importance as an equaliser of research relationships, but also openly and self-critically reflecting on what did not go very well in the research processes.

To conclude, the book can be read as an account of our journeys into studying through creative and explorative methods the way young people see the current world, their engagements and future in it. The methodological experiments and innovations documented enable us to better comprehend and analyse the processes of change in converging social and environmental problems from the young generations' perspectives. Hence, the book contributes to the much-needed methodological shift in knowledge production on youth societal participation. The narrative style of the book stems from our willingness to open our research processes in a way that partly transgresses typical academic reporting practices. We find such transparency important, especially considering that our project has been exceptionally wide reaching and explorative from the start. Because we have co-created new research methods and participation models with young people, we have often moved into unfamiliar territory. This has taught us to tolerate the uncertainties associated with conducting experimental research and appreciate its potential to create something new. It is this "creative chaos" that we have wanted to document in the book, thus contributing to a genre of research reporting that discloses the practices of doing academic research in a more vivid and authentic manner (see Helne, Hirvilammi & Alhanen 2014). In addition, as a multidisciplinary group of researchers representing various fields of knowledge ranging from politics, sociology, anthropology and law to computer science, environmental science and forestry, we have had to search for common denominators in our research practices and interpretations. It has not always been easy, but it has repeatedly proved exciting, insightful and inspiring.

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