Pathways through participation

What creates and sustains active citizenship?

Briefing paper no.1 - What is participation? Towards a round-earth view of participation

Introduction

The Pathways through Participation project aims to explore how and why people get involved and stay involved in different forms of participation over the course of their lives. It seeks to increase knowledge of people's pathways into and through participation, and improve understanding of the factors that shape their participation over time.

The project team has completed a literature review that brings together different bodies of literature on participation, which have often been viewed in isolation. The review focuses predominantly on community development, volunteering and public participation, but we also referred to literature on social movements, everyday politics, and ethical consumption.

This briefing paper is the first in a series of summaries highlighting some of the key points to come out of the literature review. It outlines our understanding of participation and how project is framing participation.

Defining participation

Participation means many things to many people. Our review of the different bodies of literature about participation and of the various classifications of participatory activities helped to highlight the breadth of activities people are engaged in and identify some of the overlapping meanings and expressions of participation. It allowed us to distinguish three broad categories of participation - public, social and individual participation – which are defined below:

Participation	Public	Social	Individual
Refers to...	The engagement of individuals with the various structures and institutions of democracy. Key to public participation is the relationship between individuals and the state.	The collective activities that individuals may be involved in. The associations people form between and for themselves are at the heart of social participation.	The individual choices and actions that people make as part of their daily life and that are statements of the kind of society they want to live in.
Also called...	• Political, civic or vertical participation • Participatory governance • Public engagement	• 'Associational life' • Collective action • Civil, horizontal or community participation	• 'Everyday politics'
Examples include...	• Voting in local or national elections • Being a councillor • Taking part in government consultations	• Being a member of a community group, a tenants' association or a trade union • Supporting the local hospice by volunteering • Running a study group for a faith organisation	• Buying fair-trade goods • Boycotting specific products • Donating money to charities • Signing petitions

Whilst these categories are helpful and will be used throughout our project, it is important to stress how blurred the boundaries between them can be. For example, a person campaigning and protesting against nuclear weapons might take part in demonstrations; write letters to government representatives; attend local planning meetings and use 'green energy'. All of these activities straddle public, social and individual participation.

Various authors have also highlighted the need to consider different dimensions that characterise and structure participation. Some of the dimensions suggested in the different bodies of literature that we examined include:

- informal - formal
- reactive - pro-active
- passive - active
- self-interested - altruistic
- individual - collective
- one-off - ongoing
- paid - unpaid
- resisting social change - driving change

Each of these dimensions forms a spectrum or a continuum, rather than static, binary opposites. Taking into account these dimensions helps to approach the different activities and forms of participation in a more nuanced and fluid way.

Participation in the round
Emerging from the review and the gaps we identified in the literature are four key conclusions which shape our understanding of participation and form the foundations of our research:

1. People first
In order to understand participation we need to start from the point of view of the individuals experiencing participation, rather than with the institutions that create the spaces and processes for participation. Putting individuals at the forefront of our thinking about participation forces us to question who is getting involved at different points in time and across different types of activities; where, how and why they got involved; who is left out and how; what they have been doing; where, how and why participation has been facilitated, and to what effect.

2. Context is all important
Participation cannot be understood by looking at the individual alone; we also need to look at participation in context. Understanding participation as 'situated practice', a concept developed by Andrea Cornwall and John Gaventa, allows us to explore how participation is rooted in place and space. The literature provides some insight into participation as a practice situated in space and place, however the emphasis tends to be on individual episodes of participation rather than on exploring how participation 'flows' through and across these different spaces and places.

Time is another important contextual factor, but there is very little systematic study of how participation is situated in time - both in individuals' life times and in the sense of spaces for participation being time-specific. In viewing participation as situated in time we need to understand how individuals move in and out of different forms of participation over the course of their lives.

3. Relationships matter
To understand participation we also need to consider the relationships between the following different elements:

- **Relationships between activities**: What links are there, if any, between different types and episodes of participation, between the techniques that are used to facilitate participation and the

different dimensions of participatory activities? The literature makes clear that there are multiple forms of participation, which vary in nature, field, depth and intensity, but sheds very little light on the links and flows between them.

- **Relationships between individual life experiences and participatory activities**: Do certain life experiences lead individuals to engage in certain types of participatory activities? Can any patterns be identified in people's histories of participation across their life course, or according to life events? The existing literature offers relatively little insight into the nature of these relationships or their relative importance.

- **Relationships between people**: The literature stresses the importance of the social relationships and networks between people in shaping access to, and the experience of, participation. The role of social networks, for example, in determining whether or not someone is asked to get involved in a participatory activity has been repeatedly shown to be significant.

- **Relationships between people and the state**: There has been much written about the importance of the relationships between people and the state in shaping public participation, but less so in terms of social and individual participation. Yet the impact of these relationships spreads across the three categories of participation that we have identified.

4. The pertinence of power
It is impossible to review the literature without recognising the significance of power dynamics in shaping participation. All participatory activities, the contexts in which they happen and the relationships which shape them, are affected by power relations. The various manifestations of power highlighted within the review include, for example: the inequality/equality of access and of opportunity; and the variations in influence and resources of different participatory actors.

An emerging framework of participation
The review attempted to integrate different bodies of literature on participation, to capture the multi-dimensions of participation and move towards a 'round-earth' view of participation, away from what David Horton Smith has characterised, in the context of voluntary action, as a 'flat-earth map' in which only part of the whole is known.

The conclusions drawn from this review have shaped the development of an emerging framework for participation which reflects our understanding of what participation is and how it needs to be viewed in the context of our project. The framework (see figure on following page) focuses on the key experiential elements of participation in practice: the actors; the activities; the places in which activities occur; and the time over which they develop. It then focuses on some of the key dimensions of participation - the intensity of engagement, for example, or whether it is an individual or collective activity. Finally, it highlights what are emerging as some of the key shaping forces influencing people's pathways through participation. This framework will inform our fieldwork and will be tested and refined in the subsequent stages of the project.

Framework for understanding individuals' pathways through participation
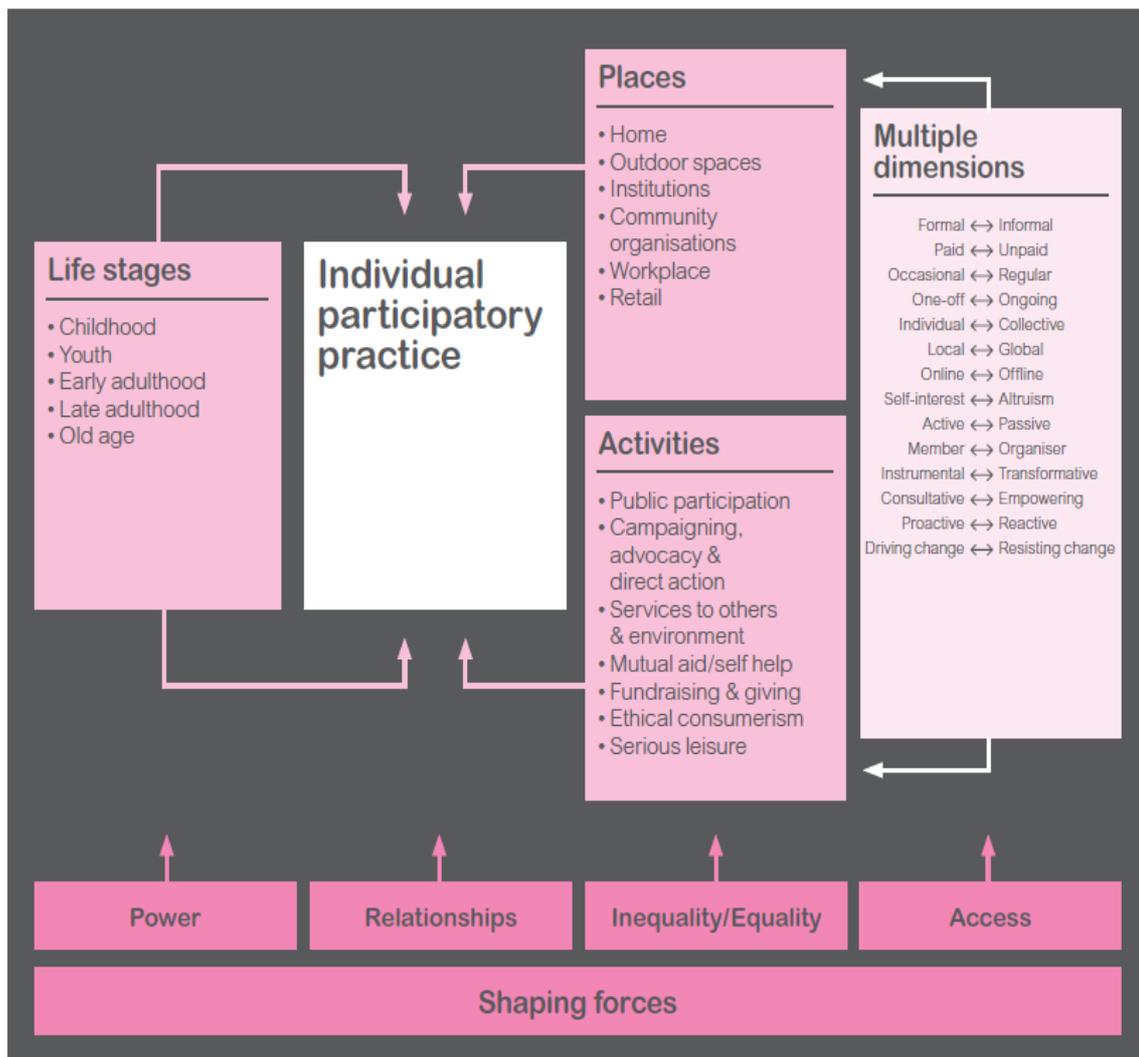
Further information

To download the literature review (which includes a detailed reference list) and to comment, go to http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/2010/01/understanding-participation-a-literature-review/

For more information on the Pathways through Participation project or to subscribe to our newsletter visit the website http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/
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