

# Perplexity: The emotional complexities of generating user participation in public sector organizations.

*Anne Pässilä and Russ Vince*

## ABSTRACT

Public service organizations are full of contradictory feelings and actions, that both invite users to participate, and that discourage them from participation. In this research, arts-based methods were used to study emotional and organizational dynamics that are integral to the development and avoidance of young peoples' participation in the services designed for them. The theoretical puzzle that motivates this study concerns how to identify and engage with emotions, tensions and defenses embedded in services for young people that simultaneously both encourage and discourage participation. The main argument is that engaging with the *perplexity* (the emotional complexity) within the system is a key factor in improving both providers' and users' understanding of participation. The study addresses a gap in knowledge about individual and social defenses against participation; as well as how to support participation by working through such defenses. The paper contributes to systems psychodynamic theory by linking social defenses and mixed emotions to better understand the emotional complexity of attempts to involve young people in the services designed for them. Perplexity is presented as a heuristic for engaging with the ongoing tension between avoidance and improvement. Art-pedagogy provides a medium through which to develop user participation in public service organizations.

## KEYWORDS

Perplexity  
Participation  
Systems psychodynamics  
Social defenses  
Emotion in organizations  
Arts-based research  
Public sector organizations  
Art-pedagogy.

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## INTRODUCTION

Public service organizations are full of contradictory emotions and actions, that both invite users to participate, and that discourage them from participation. This is particularly the case for young peoples' involvement in the services designed for them. Existing research suggests that young peoples' participation is made to fit into the agendas of organizing adults (Tisdall, 2008; Percy-Smith, 2015); and that restrictions are placed on both the extent and the outcomes of young peoples' participation (Pells, 2010), leading to widespread disappointment (Fung, 2015). It has also been suggested that participatory processes can rely too much on generalized models and instrumental approaches, and thereby suffer from a 'tyranny of techniques' (Cleaver, 1999). These limitations have led to the claim that young peoples' agency to create an active role in society is challenged by the very organizational structures that intend to enable such agency (Mascherini, Salvatore, Meierkord & Jungblut, 2012).

To explore and address this claim, we study emotional and organizational dynamics that are integral to the development and avoidance of young peoples' participation. We focus on the interconnection between various actors' lived experience of the system in which participation is negotiated. We argue that engaging with the *perplexity* (the emotional complexity) within the organizational system is an important factor in improving young peoples' participation. We address a gap in knowledge about individual and social defenses against an emotional commitment to participation; as well as how participation can be supported by noticing and working through such defenses.

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Perplexity is defined as an affective state of confusion that causes hesitation, inaction, or avoidance.

Perplexity is defined as an affective state of confusion that causes hesitation, inaction, or avoidance. It has both behavioral and organizational implications for young peoples' participation in service development and delivery. Perplexity can discourage individual action and sustain collective feelings of caution that encourage organizational groups to become defensive or parochial. It arises from everyday emotions – anxiety, embarrassment, feeling uncertain or confused – that are experienced by persons in connection with the emotional and political dynamics of the system within which they occur. Perplexity both stems from and creates confusion and uncertainty in organizations. It is characteristic of both service provider and service recipient experience within the system, but in different ways. We contend that reflections on the emotions and organizational dynamics that result from perplexity are important for building a relevant and user-focused public service.

Using arts-based research methods, we studied attempts to promote participation within public services that are designed for young people in Finland. We show that the desire to involve young people in public services is enacted through persistent tensions, and that consequently, everyone involved experiences the perplexity in the system. Young people experience perplexity because they are both invited to contribute to services and kept outside of meaningful involvement. Local managers experience perplexity because they are both driven by quality and measurement requirements and puzzled by their limitations in addressing users' real issues. Leaders and policy makers experience perplexity because they are both aware of the need for holistic services and constrained by political issues and relations that fragment their

vision. Looking at public service development through the notion of perplexity reveals tensions that are integral to attempts at development. However, we also suggest that reflection on such inter-personal and organizational dynamics is important for building public services.

Our theoretical contribution in this paper is to introduce and develop the notion of perplexity to provide a conceptual frame through which to comprehend mixed emotions and defensive organizational dynamics generated by attempts to implement participation. Existing studies of social defenses have identified the inter-personal and systemic issues of emotions like anxiety (Menzies, 1960; Krantz, 2010). However, there are few studies that explore the inter-relations between conflicting emotions and their associated political positions - for example, between a genuine desire to improve participation and persistent behaviour that undermines it. We contribute to systems psychodynamic theory in organization studies by linking social defenses and mixed emotions. Our practical contribution is to position perplexity as a heuristic for engaging with the tension between avoidance and improvement. Existing studies in Finland have shown that there are political tensions and competing interests that influence the design and delivery of services for young people (Gretschel, Paakkunainen, Souto, & Suurpää, 2014; Matthies, Närhi & Kokkonen, 2018). However, there is little awareness of the emotional complexity that underpins issues of user participation in service design and delivery. For various reasons, organizations simultaneously do and do not want to improve participation from young people, they want to make it happen *and* avoid it. We argue that engaging with peoples' lived experience of such tensions offers insights into how to work with and through them.



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We use systems psychodynamic theory (SP) to create a conceptual emphasis through which to comprehend mixed emotions, defensive organizational dynamics, and persistent tensions generated by attempts to implement participation.

## THEORETICAL FRAME

In this paper we engage with a specific aspect of a common problem. The desire to improve participation is often challenged by the very behaviors and structures that intend to enable it. The theoretical puzzle that motivates this research concerns how to identify and engage with emotions, tensions and defenses embedded in services for young people that simultaneously both encourage and discourage participation. Ignoring or avoiding the emotions, tensions and defenses that arise from attempts at participation reinforces an organization's inability to foster it.

We use systems psychodynamic theory (SP) to create a conceptual emphasis through which to comprehend mixed emotions, defensive organizational dynamics, and persistent tensions generated by attempts to implement participation. Our psychodynamic lens helps us to identify emotional and organizational dynamics that characterize tensions and that are linked to the development and avoidance of young peoples' participation. We focus on the interconnection between various actors' lived experience of the system in which participation is both encouraged and discouraged. We emphasise the emotional and political *relatedness* between the various parts of a system to highlight elements to perplexity that create persistent tensions. Relatedness refers to: 'conscious and unconscious emotional levels of connection that exist between and shape selves and others, people and systems' (French & Vince, 1999: 7). Tensions both represent emotional complexities associated with undermining young peoples' participation in the system, and they offer a focal point for efforts to improve their participation.

We argue that an SP frame adds to existing knowledge in ways that support an in-depth analysis of emotions and tensions in organizations where user participation is wanted and avoided at the same time. We already know much about the structuring effects of emotion in organizations. For example, public sector organizations can generate inter-personal and structural circularities of caution and blame that restrict behaviour and action, aiding the creation of defensive silos (Vince & Saleem, 2004). Similarly, unwanted emotions are dissipated, reframed, or adapted to normalise behaviour and action in organizations (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2002), helping to sustain established power relations and undermine efforts towards change. Our interest is in clarifying the emotional complexities that are mobilised across different organizational groups involved in attempts to improve participation. Our frame helps us to conceptualise ways in which these complexities can be used to build reflective capacity and action.

#### *Systems psychodynamic theory*

Research using a SP lens studies ‘the interaction between collective structures, norms, and practices, on the one hand, and the cognitions, motivations, and emotions of members of those collectives on the other’ (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020: 413). Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2020: 413-4) outline four principles of SP scholarship: (1) a focus on how unconscious forces affect human functioning; (2) a focus on the interaction between individual and collective levels of analysis; (3) a participative stance toward the production of theory and change in the field; and (4) a subversive intent towards the authority of detached scientists and that of repressive leaders and bureaucratic organizations. Therefore, SP theory helps us to understand emotion and organization from the ‘inside-out’ – how persons’ internal worlds impact on organising; and from the ‘outside-in’ – an organization’s structuring effects on emotions, behaviour, and action (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020).

This lens guides researchers to conceptualize emotions not only as internal to individuals, but also as inter-subjective experiences that are generated collectively through self/other relations to create both short-term emotional responses and more durable emotional dispositions (Voronov, 2014). For example, Vince (2019) describes the ‘structuring fantasies’ that can arise in organizations and institutions, that hold people together in groups, and show how people’s inner worlds are connected to systems of conformity or control. ‘People invest in fantasies that help to sustain institutional order, to contain and limit the intensity of emotion within systems, as well as the implications of emotions in practice’ (Vince, 2019: 961).



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SP theory helps scholars to understand how and why collective emotional dispositions come to dominate within specific organizational contexts (Hoggett & Thompson, 2002), as well as how the opposite of what is espoused can become the norm. A key assumption is that unconscious dynamics influence people’s responses to emotion in organizations; within interpersonal dynamics that are mobilized by persons’ lived experience of the organization; and as an *associative unconscious* (Long, 2019; Long & Harney, 2013) that is collectively mobilized to avoid, minimize, and transform emotions. ‘Such associations are not random but generated by groups of human beings navigating their lives through complex environments’ (Long, 2019: 224). Unconscious dynamics have political effects in the sense that they ‘allow people to claim their experience of and in the organization, without submitting to its control or being consumed by resisting to it’ (Petriglieri

& Petriglieri, 2020: 424). This can lead to an ‘imagined stability’ in organizations (Vince, 2002), where conflicts and tensions are managed through an underlying fantasy of consistency and coherence. For example, Diamond and Adams (1999) studied a Department of Public Welfare with an espoused ethic of care that, at the same time, (unconsciously) undermined ethical behaviour. People worked in a hostile and uncaring environment, but one that maintained a narrative of itself as pleasant and collegial.



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In this paper we focus on a central component of the ‘outside-in’ domain of inquiry in SP theory, which is *social defenses* against emotion (Hirschhorn, 1988; Krantz, 2010; Padavic, Ely & Reid, 2019). Social defenses protect groups of actors against emotions inherent in a system, and thereby (over time) create limitations to emotion expression, behaviour, and action within that system. They enable members of a system to exclude unwanted, difficult, or conflicting emotions, but in doing so they reduce the ways in which these emotions can inform and support change. Therefore, social defenses provide insight into the relationship between individual and collective emotions and the (political) structures that emerge to contain emotions. Here, we investigated the possibility that youth services’ approach to young people’s participation functioned as a social defense against participation.

### *Social defenses against emotion*

Social defenses are ‘collective arrangements – such as an organizational structure, a work method, or a prevalent discourse – created or used by an organization’s members as a protection against disturbing affect derived from external threats, internal conflicts, or the nature of their work’ (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010: 47). They align with individual and relational defense mechanisms, which are unconscious strategies used by persons to control their emotions. This might include ‘projecting’ an unwanted aspect of the self/ group onto others (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012); or ‘splitting’ the good from the bad to create idealized notions of the self/ group (Gabriel, 1997). While such efforts can offer short-term protection from external threats and internal conflicts, they also conceal the emotional complexities of situations, promote limitations on emotional expression, encourage dependency on rational or instrumental approaches to work, and emphasize conformity. For example, one of the first studies to identify the functioning of defences in organizations was Menzies’ (1960) study of nursing services in a general hospital. She found that organizational approaches to planning and decision-making led to a depersonalized and fragmented pattern of care, ritualistic work, impersonal relationships with patients, and other characteristics that shielded nurses from emotions stimulated by close contact with patients and their families (Krantz, 2010).

Social defenses limit an organization’s ability to adapt to changes in its environment (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). For example, Fotaki and Hyde (2015) identify organizational ‘blind spots’ that develop as a defense against unrealistic or failing strategy or policy goals. Limitations in strategic aims reinforce blind spots through processes of splitting, blame and idealization, and thereby enable organizations ‘to persist with unsuccessful courses of action’ (Fotaki & Hyde, 2015: 441). Similarly, Padavic, Ely, and Reid (2019) show how an attempt to implement flexible work-family policies not only failed to advance women’s prospects within an organization, but also further damaged them. They present a case from within a professional services firm

to explain how work-family dynamics became a 'hegemonic narrative - a pervasive, status-quo-preserving story that prevails despite countervailing evidence' (Padavic, Ely & Reid, 2019: 61). This narrative was used as a social defense against emotion and in support of powerful groups to sustain workplace inequality. They show how social defenses reinforced a dominant discourse that both stalled the advancement of women within the organization and benefitted men.



### *Social defenses and paradoxical tensions*

A stream of work that links SP with organizational paradox has argued that tensions activate defenses in organizations (Jarrett & Vince, 2017; Lewis, 2000; Vince & Broussine, 1996). This perspective draws on work by Smith and Berg (1987) who maintain that tensions are ubiquitous in groups and social systems. They show how a group's journey towards polarization, self-limiting behaviours, and reduced capability to act occurs because of group members' inability to manage the paradoxical nature of group life. Smith and Berg's work on paradox in groups (Berg & Smith, 1990; Smith & Berg 1987) gave rise to an important insight into the self-contradictory dynamics of emotion in organizations: 'the more that members seek to rationally pull the contradictions apart, to separate them so that they will not be experienced as contradictory, the more they become enmeshed in the self-referential binds of paradox' (Vince & Broussine, 1996: 7).

SP theory offers a framework through which to understand paradoxical tensions arising from emotion in organizations. An SP lens helps us to make sense of complex personal and interpersonal tensions, for example, how people endanger themselves through their attempts to protect themselves (Phillips,

2014); how organizational efforts towards diversity can undermine the value of difference (Levine, 2003); and how social defenses cover over disparities in social power relations (Handy & Rowlands, 2017). SP theory emphasizes both the emotional complexities of inter-personal relationships, and shared emotions that reinforce and undermine prevailing dispositions and established structures. Jarrett and Vince (2017) highlight three assumptions that underpin the relationship between SP and organizational paradox. First, SP theory helps persons to perceive and engage with relations and practices that are designed to achieve one aim but end up mobilizing its opposite. Second, social defenses are attempts to manage everyday anxieties and fears, and yet they somehow legitimize that anxiety in ways that diminish persons' desire to act. Third, there is value in those things that our emotions try to make us avoid. They can provide essential organizational knowledge in our search for change. Jarrett and Vince (2017) argue that an interest in the shared interpretation of underlying dynamics draws attention to mutually reinforcing tensions, which opens opportunities for change.



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The focal point for such opportunities is a situated theory of perplexity in organizations, which highlights context specific tensions that can inform change. SP theory provides a knowledge base from which to comprehend perplexity within public service organizations. Research has not yet examined how social defenses are used to both invite and exclude young peoples' participation. We think that a focus on the perplexity mobilised within a system offers a new way of understanding complex emotional dynamics within organizations, and their individual and collective effects. Within our empirical context, this has practical implications for improvements in young persons' emotional attachment to services, and through this to the relevance of services. We return to and elaborate on this point in our discussion section.

Taking a SP approach encourages new insights into the emotional, relational, and political dynamics of participation - both the relative ambivalence of service providers, and the struggles to give voice to the underlying issues for service users. Our overarching research question was: what are the emotional and organizational dynamics that are integral to the development and avoidance of young peoples' participation in the systems designed for them? Our assumption here was that we would not be able to fully comprehend the possibilities and problems of young peoples' participation in the services designed for them without considering how both the providers and the recipients of services are tied together emotionally, relationally, and politically in ways that subvert the desire to support participation. This understanding led to three more specific questions. What are the individual and social defenses mobilized against young peoples' participation in services for young people? Our interest is in the tensions that emerge from the lived experience of both service providers and recipients. Following on from this, what are the tensions that block the creation of a holistic public service with and for young people? Our interest is in the emotions and organizational dynamics that sustain these tensions. Also, how can an improved awareness of tensions provide the opportunity for young peoples' participation to be better understood and embedded in the system? Our interest is in the situated dynamics that need to be addressed to ensure that organizations become open to young peoples' participation.



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## RESEARCH CONTEXT AND DESIGN

### *Research Context*

Our study is undertaken in the context of policy changes initiated by the Finnish government. The government established a law on youth education and policy designed to support young peoples' (aged 16-30) participation in the services that are relevant to them. This law also aims to support and promote young peoples' equality, growth, and independence. The policy is a core agenda of the Finnish government and has been developed through collaborations between a wide range of research projects funded through the European Union's European Social Fund (ESF), alongside local level practitioners and service users. The specific aim of this project is to develop new models to facilitate young adults' access to working life and to address the need for new ideas and solutions for reducing youth unemployment. Alongside the national policy agenda was a recognition from regional and local professionals involved in service delivery that *'we cannot continue with existing ways of doing what we are supposed to be doing'* (Local Project Manager).

Initially, ESF funded projects were broadly focused on the search for the *'new types of organization that will be needed to provide innovative solutions and models to address this wicked problem for the young generation'* (National Coordinator). However, a key problem with the implementation of 'new types of organization' is service providers' underlying emotional dependency on old types of organization. Rationally, new approaches to persistent problems make sense. Emotionally and relationally, meaningful connections with service users requires sustained commitment, as well as significant changes of individual and collective perspective and practice. Studying the perplexity generated by this tension offers a way to better understand and work with it.

## Research Design

To better understand and address the tensions that are part of attempts to move towards client-driven services, we used an arts-based research approach. Arts-based research methods (Coemans & Hannes, 2017; Leavy, 2018; Linstead, 2018; McNiff, 1998) use the expressive qualities of different forms to create and convey meaning (Barone & Eisner 2012). Research designs usually involve researchers and respondents engaging in art making as a way of generating knowledge (Leavy, 2018). Researchers can draw on a variety of representational forms for data generation and analysis, whether literary (poetry, stories, experimental writing); performative (music, song, dance, theatre); and visual (drawing, photography, painting, collage). Such methods are seen as particularly effective in research that aims to capture underlying emotions and relations present within specific organizational contexts (see Kjellstrand & Vince, 2020); and inquiries linked to possibilities for management and organizational learning (Black, 2020; Krauss, 2019; Springborg and Ladkin, 2018).

We used an arts-based method called *artful inquiry*, which ‘stresses the development of intersubjective understanding; researcher and respondent interpretations interact to create multiple forms of meaning’ (Barry, 1996: 411). Theatrical images were initially used to stimulate associations with and reflection on respondents’ experience of service delivery (see below). These then set the stage for ‘collective voicing’, which involved writing, painting, and performing key narratives of lived experience within youth services. There are two reasons why artful inquiry was seen as the most appropriate design for this part of the study. First, it provided a collaborative method for interaction with both unemployed young people and youth service professionals (separately and together) over the period of data collection and analysis. Second, artful inquiry offered a creative way to capture



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participants’ lived experience of the tensions embedded in the service; and it was particularly important as a framework through which young people could communicate about their experience of the services designed for them. Artful inquiry both generated data on the tensions present in the research environment and provided expressive forms through which emotions and relations associated with them could be communicated.

## Data Collection

Data collection occurred between September 2015 and July 2018. There were three overlapping phases in the overall research design.

Phase One – Negotiation and Testing: In this stage the primary researcher (first author) spent time building knowledge and learning about the organizational context of the research through email conversations, phone calls, face-to-face meetings with key individuals and focus group meetings. She kept a research journal of these encounters to help organize her thoughts. This led to clarification of the research questions; to the initial design of the research; and to testing and refining arts-based methods within sample groups of young people, organizational members, and arts-based practitioners. Two general characteristics of the research context became apparent. First, that most people involved found their experiences perplexing in one way or another. Second, different professional interest groups defended particular approaches to service design, reflecting political, managerial or professional ideas, interests and agendas. There were different ideas of what kind of change would be needed in the design process for youth services and how this change might be reached. These differences did little to improve or support young adults’ agency, or to encourage their participation in a design process that supported service improvement.

Phase Two – Artful Inquiries: Five artful inquiries were created to comprehend peoples’ experiences and to generate insights into the relations between the various actors involved in youth services. These three-day events involved:

young people, local project managers, national coordinators, a regional project manager, youth education research and development experts, youth workers, and policy makers (national and regional). They were recorded and transcribed. In Narrative 1 (below) we describe a participant's initial experience of one of these events.

**NARRATIVE 1** - A Participant's Understanding of Being Part of the Research – A descriptive story from an artful inquiry with youth service designers

We were informed about the research by e-mail before the event and given the opportunity to ask about it. A team of national coordinators welcomed us and explained why the meeting was planned in this way, why we are here, and why the researcher is here. The researcher explained the research and we read written information about the purpose, the methods, and how the experience will be documented. She assured us that all research data is handled confidentially and stored securely.

We asked questions like: "What are the benefit of this?" The researcher said: "While I am listening and collecting your points of view, you have the space to reflect on where you are in your design process and to share your experiences and ideas of how you can improve services for young people." She explained how and why reflection is organised with the help of arts-based methods. Some of us were laughing and we told her that we do not need to dance or sing or paint. She told us that participation in any stage of the inquiry is voluntary. It is fine to step out of the conversation and action, to sit and to observe.

We discussed how our conversations and actions are documented and we were asked to give our permission for two of the national coordinator team members to act as research assistants. They documented the process using photography and video. The researcher told us that we could withdraw consent for the use of our data now or at any later date. It would no longer be included in the ongoing research. After that we wrote an agreement. One of us did not want to take part in the research and she would not sign the consent form. However, she did want to take part in the reflection. The researcher said that this was fine and that her views, or photos of her, would not be documented. She accepted this and stayed.

Artful inquiries involved the use of arts-based data collection methods and arts-based reflection by research participants. They began with the use of *theatrical images*. Theatrical images are a visual method for generating data on peoples' emotional, relational, and political experiences of organizations. Participants *associate* with the images as representations of their experience in the system. We provide a few examples of these images (Figure 1, below). Participants were able to choose from around 50 different images that they can use as visual representations of their experiences of work. All the images are constructed based on five elements of drama: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. A library of over 500 theatrical images have been created by a team including the researcher (first author), a visual designer, three actors and a photographer.



Six examples of 'theatrical images' used in the research

The artful inquiries generated an in-depth picture of the perspectives and experiences of both service designers and young people. This allowed us to build a response in relation to our main research question: what are the emotional and organizational dynamics that are integral to the development and avoidance of young peoples' participation in the systems designed for them? In Narrative 2 (below) we describe a participant's initial experience of using theatrical images.

**NARRATIVE 2 - A Participant's View on Data Collection Using Theatrical Images – A descriptive story from an artful inquiry with youth service designers (February 2016)**

The researcher asked us to gather around a big table full of images. She introduced these, which she called 'theatrical images.' She told us how we could use them to reflect on the past and the present related to the service design process we were in middle of. One of the research assistants joined our group in a role of 'participant observer'. She recorded and documented our conversation. Every now and again she joined in by asking detailed questions.

We walked around the table and looked at the images. I began by choosing ones that seem to relate to what is happening in my work. I quickly found three theatrical images that connected with my experience. After that, in the group, we told each other about work-related issues with the help of theatrical images. We talked about our feelings, a sense of urgency, enthusiasm, the goals that have been set for us, the difficulties we face. We asked ourselves – how do we do what we are expected to do? It was a relief to hear that others have similar problems to mine. I also found that different towns and service centers have different challenges. I noticed that the development of the service in different towns was at different stages. Some were already well advanced, whereas I feel that we are just at the beginning. We identified the current challenges in our service design process. We grouped our images by theme and introduced our burning issues to the rest of the group. The researcher documented our conversation onto a huge paper taped on the wall. After our conversation, we gathered around this to reflect on the problems and issues we are facing in our service development process.



...what are the emotional and organizational dynamics that are integral to the development and avoidance of young peoples' participation in the systems designed for them?

After each artful inquiry we organized a 'validation space'. Through conversation with academic colleagues and members of an artist group we reflected on the results, processes, and ethics of the artful inquiries. This helped us to evaluate which arts-based methods were most effective; it provided an overview of the process; and an initial analysis of the events. We organized six validation spaces (one after the completion of the five artful inquiries) with a total of 14 colleagues.

Phase Three – Collective Voicing and Co-creation: The data from the artful inquiries were used to inform the development of a reflective space where emotions and tensions could be communicated in sympathetic and creative ways. We focused on how young people could develop their own voice within youth services. This involved 'collective voicing' sessions with artists, educators, and young people. Collective voicing uses drama, drawing, videos, and other visualizations to co-create performance and imagery that communicates the key issues for young people in using youth services. (We provide examples in our vignettes). This was followed up with sessions for youth service professionals and researchers at which young peoples' visualizations and perspectives were used as resources for reflection and development.

In total, data were collected from two testing sessions, five artful inquiries, and seven collective voice meetings. This generated 162 hours of transcripts from work with 171 participants. The data were captured using video recordings, audio recordings, observation notes, photographic images, and drawings. All recordings were transcribed (in Finnish).

## >> ...why were so many different actors in the system perplexed from their different roles in relation to young peoples' participation?

### *Analysis*

We had a lot of data to analyze, both during and after the data gathering events. There is no consistent 'boilerplate' for data generation and analysis in qualitative research, which can be an advantage because 'what is lost in structure is gained in the ability to be creative' (Pratt, 2009: 861). Our creativity was embedded in the here and now experience of doing the research and it was only when we looked back at all the data, we realized how difficult it would be to analyze it all inductively – systematically generating codes, forming categories, and building themes from the data. Therefore, our strategy for analysis was to 'focus on puzzles' (Grodal, Anteby & Holm, 2020), which is a strategy that privileges the salience or intensity of key aspects of the data; and helps to stimulate new lines of inquiry. 'Focusing on puzzles might help us abduct new insights about a novel and untheorized category which may be present in the data' (Grodal, Anteby & Holm, 2020: 15).

We became intrigued with two key puzzles in our data. First, why were so many different actors in the system perplexed from their different roles in relation to young peoples' participation? This connects with our first research question about social defenses against participation. Second, our data suggested various

tensions associated with young peoples' participation, particularly between how young people interpret their own life situations and how professional staff interpreted things on their behalf. We were interested in focusing in on why this tension was persistent, as well as other tensions associated with it. This connects with our second and third research questions on tensions that block participation but might also encourage it.

The main element of creativity in our analysis was to recognize that coding can be both an iterative and a relational process (Locke, Feldman, & Golden-Biddle, 2020). We combined data collection and research participants' reflective analysis in the artful inquiries to help us to pinpoint significant codes and categories. Codes were identified as things were named (Saldana, 2016) and noticed in public within the artful inquiries and collective voicing sessions. For example, there were stark differences in articulation and interpretation of life situation, needs and capabilities between young people and professional staff. Categories emerged later as we reflected on the data and identified significant tensions and disconnects that seemed to characterize perplexity and support our theorizing.

In summary, our analysis involved focusing on puzzling elements in our data. We looked back at the ways in which experiences and situations were named and noticed by participants as one way to code these puzzling elements. We developed categorizations associated with persistent tensions and system disconnects that seemed to inform how perplexity is created in the system. In Table 1 (below) we provide descriptions of eight categories alongside brief descriptions in relation to our research questions, and the effects on participation.

Table 1: Categories, Questions, and the Effects on Participation

| Categories<br>(Main Disconnects)                                        | Social defenses against<br>participation (RQ1)                                                                                                                                                                                         | Tensions that impede<br>participation (RQ2)                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. <b>Different<br/>situations/<br/>different<br/>needs.</b>            | Authorities position young people through the stigma of unemployment, and how this defines their needs as a citizen. For authorities, addressing this stigma means young people finding full-time employment.                          | Young people want to be treated as a person not positioned as a problem. They see unemployment as a temporary state<br><br>Authorities define young peoples' 'stigma' for them. They see unemployment as the main service issue. |
| 2. <b>Different<br/>notions of<br/>agency</b>                           | Authorities rely on policy rhetoric, which aims to: <i>'confirm young peoples' agency, support their growth, help them to become independent, nurturing young people, with access to society and activity as well as equity'</i> .     | The tension between what is meaningful for young people, and how authorities define what was meaningful for them.<br><br>Young peoples' active choices are not deemed legitimate.                                                |
| 3. <b>Self-limiting<br/>enactments of<br/>professional<br/>identity</b> | Authorities' professional identity towards young people ( <i>'our customers'</i> ) discourages the questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of the problem; or approaches that might deliver potential solutions. | There is an implicit tension in the construction of authorities' professional identity – between constraints on available approaches and the possibility of challenging embedded assumptions.                                    |

| Situated dynamics that need to<br>be addressed (RQ3)                                                                                                       | Effects on<br>participation                                                                                                                                                              | Illustration                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Addressing the difference between how young adults interpret their own life situations and how authorities interpret on their behalf.                      | Young people withdraw in the face of a prescribed stigma.<br><br>Authorities reinforce a limited perspective on the function of participation in the system.                             | <i>'They want to get me out of government support, well, I do understand that they don't want me to be a bum... they want to get rid of me/ us, as I am a problem within the system'</i> (AI 1)                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Addressing the limitations placed on young peoples' roles and relations in the system.                                                                     | Young people feel alienated.<br><br>Authorities reinforce a limited perspective on the function of participation in the system.                                                          | <i>'My work in a voluntary organization does not fit with authorities' definitions of what is useful activity for an unemployed person'</i> (AI 2)                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Addressing the idealization of what a young person can become because of professional intervention; and how/ what staff can be in their professional role. | Young people are marginalized as customers, offering limited scope for participation.<br><br>Authorities find it difficult to expand their professional role to encourage participation. | <i>'We identify young people as a problem, and that itself is part of the exclusion. We are excluding them by asking "what is the problem that blocks you to from achieving what you want" and then we start to fix a different problem. We are not encountering them as they are. The system we are creating is based on what I think the support should be'</i> (AI 3) |

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| <b>4. Different professional languages.</b>                                       | <p>Authorities use professional language to defend against meaning.</p> <p>The (obscure) language of business: <i>'The one-stop guidance center is an entrepreneur community'</i> (AI 3).</p> <p>The (paternalistic) language of empowerment: <i>'a supporting tool for growth, to explore and find out who you are, which direction I am heading, what inspires me. Finding strength and supporting people'</i> (AI 3).</p> | <p>There is an explicit tension between different professional languages used to position young people (as customers) and their intended effects.</p> <p>One tends to distance authorities from the young people through jargon. Another tries to mobilize holistic values of care, but in a paternalistic way.</p>                                                              |
| <b>5. Different perspectives between organizations involved in youth services</b> | <p>Authorities overly defend sub-system boundaries between different professional groups.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <p>There are continuous tensions around entrenched ways of working and the competitive nature of working together to co-create services (especially between multi-professional team project-coordinators and project-managers.)</p> <p>This was in addition to the expressed desire to learn to do things differently and to work together in the face of existing tensions.</p> |
| <b>6. Different values</b>                                                        | <p>Authorities seek to enact two sets of values simultaneously within youth services (financial and social) without thinking through the impact of these contrasting values on each other.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <p>Tensions between the desire for efficient financial management of youth services; and an approach that involves young people in defining the assumptions that underpin the services designed for them.</p>                                                                                                                                                                    |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Addressing the use of economic (entrepreneurial) and instrumental (toolbox) metaphors to express problems.</p> <p>Developing a language associated with and accessible to young people as part of a pedagogical process of involvement and participation.</p> | <p>Young people can feel patronized by authorities' professional language and interactions.</p> <p>Authorities are locked into platitudes that discourage participation.</p>                                                    | <p><i>'Authorities look at their computer a lot. They ask odd questions.'</i> (AI 2).</p> <p>Young people felt differently when authorities were <i>'talking like a human, without sarcasm... and not slobbering all over me'</i> (AI 2).</p>                                                                                                                                          |
| <p>The co-construction of a new approach to working across sub-system boundaries while addressing the continued existence of limiting professional relations and inter-organizational competition.</p>                                                           | <p>Authorities are ambivalent about participation between different part of the system responsible for providing youth services.</p> <p>Authorities' ambivalence undermines the potential for young peoples' participation.</p> | <p><i>'My professional values and practices are more correct and better than yours'</i>. (AI 3).</p> <p><i>'The fundamental nature of co-creation in multi-professional knowledge and skill building is that the team needs to have ability to combine diversity which can only be done together. It is not based on the expertise of one specific professional field'</i> (AI 4).</p> |
| <p>Addressing the problem that arises from over-dependency on established ways of working and the consequent reluctance to change.</p>                                                                                                                           | <p>Authorities create <i>'pseudo commitments about developing new ways of working together'</i> (AI 3). Participation becomes a pseudo-commitment.</p>                                                                          | <p><i>'A societal discourse and the financiers' discourse are dissimilar: the latter needs to cover-up nurturing and caring with efficiency and training for work'</i> (AI 3).</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                     |

|                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>7. The loss of a pedagogical mission</b> | Authorities are defended against learning.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | The tension between an integral service pedagogy (developmental mission) oriented towards young people as active citizens; and a focus on what existing structures/ mechanisms allow them to do or block them from doing. |
| <b>8. Measurement maintains distance</b>    | <p>Authorities use measurement as a defense against their own and young peoples' emotional experience of service delivery.</p> <p>Measurement gives authorities the idea that they can control the situation. It provides a process through which to distance themselves from the human aspects of the problems they try to address.</p> | The tension between measurement as useful statistical data and measurement as an expression of the fulfillment of political and policy targets.                                                                           |

|                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
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| Co-creating and reimagining a developmental mission through art-pedagogy.                                    | Authorities are detached from their own learning and, therefore, they remain detached from the implementation of a pedagogical mission. This reduces energy for participation on both sides.                                                                                                                       | <i>'We are we throwing away something which is essentially our core principle in youth work' (AI 3).</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Redressing the imbalance between measurement and qualitative evaluation of service provision and experience. | <p>Young people feel alienated by the obsession with measurement (it does not feel as though they are the focus of the service). If it is difficult to belong, then it is difficult to participate.</p> <p>Becoming detached: Authorities experience the pressure to provide measures of success as stressful.</p> | <p><i>'Every time it is the same. This officer asks well, hello, what is this situation of yours?' (AI 1).</i></p> <p>Internally, authorities experience <i>'agony, fear which leads to sleeplessness'</i> and <i>'fatigue'</i> (AI 3 and 4). Externally, they express their feelings as <i>'satisfaction, passion, enthusiasm'</i> (AI 3 and 4)</p> |

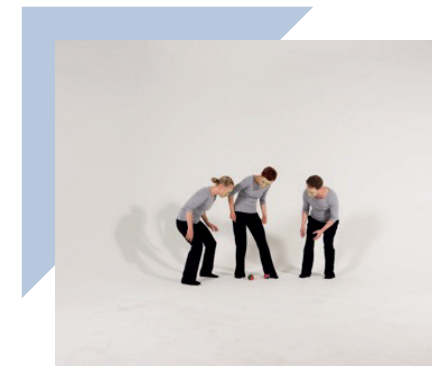
## FINDINGS

Using our categories, we identified four themes to illustrate assumptions that sustain perplexity within the system. We further refined these to describe developmental dimensions of perplexity as an organizing / organizational process in the context of young peoples' participation. Perplexity is identified as an emotional and political consequence of organizational tensions embedded within service development. In addition, the young people within our research describe the professionals they encounter (from youth, health, and social service, as well as the employment office and a social insurance institution) as *'authorities'*. Therefore, we use this term for professional staff in the same generic way. Quotes are presented in italics. We use vignettes created from the data, as well as theatrical images and associated reflections to illustrate the primary themes of our analysis.

**Theme 1: Exclusory Inclusion** – perspectives or actions within youth services that are meant to include young unemployed people but tend to exclude them. The resulting 'impossibility of influencing' informed a diminished sense of the value of participation for young people.

➤➤ Perplexity is identified as an emotional and political consequence of organizational tensions embedded within service development.

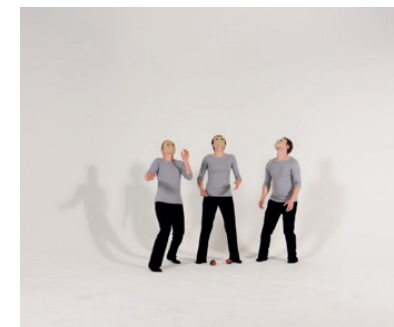
Authorities tended to emphasize an individual or person-centred perspective on the responsibilities of young people within the service. This was represented by ideas like creating a *'meaningful life'*; and that *'success in your life depends on your own effort.'* While this perspective encourages young people to be proactive in their own 'success', it can also communicate to young people that they are *'not-active enough'* or *'not trying hard enough'*. The young people do not begin their interactions with youth services from this perspective, and yet a message about 'not being enough' was internalized and had an impact on them. Some young people sought to defend themselves against this message (*'I can do all kinds of things'* AI 2); others built a survival narrative in their working lives, where untypical ways of working were normalized (for example zero hours contracts and part-time work) and any work situation was seen as better than none (*'we all want to be somewhere else other than in this situation.'* AI 1).



A focus that is meant to include but tends to exclude young people.

*'Our focus is on the young people... or at least it should be'.*

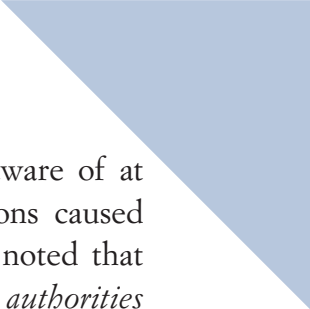
*'We maintain well-meaning talk about the importance of inclusion and young people being the subject not the object. But we stay on our own levels and in our own silos'.*



*'We are very much in a hurry, we are organizing with a lack of resources'*

*'Our hands are full of work and sometimes it feels that young peoples' presence is diminishing, it is shrinking. There is also distance between us at local level and the ministries. Ministries as national authorities are too distant to understand the needs of young people'.*

Additional reinforcement of this dynamic arose from authorities' determination not to see any social differences between the young people using the service. Therefore, all young adults are seen to have same rights and resources to education and training, whatever their social class, ethnic background, or gender. Young peoples' success is *'just dependent how much they try to seek work'* and how effectively local trans-professional groups can *'provide problem solving to these individual challenges of facing unemployment.'* Fears about the consequences of considering gendered, social, and cultural differences encourage the simplification of the complex problems that the youth service has to engage with.



Both the young people and professional staff are aware of at least some of the underlying tensions and frustrations caused by attempts at inclusion. One of the young people noted that *'feelings block both the young themselves as well as the authorities from acting in sensible ways, in ways that would be useful for those who the service is for.'* (AI 3). Authorities reflected that young peoples' involvement in the design process has reduced, that their *'presence is diminishing, it is shrinking'*; and that *'ministries as national authorities are too distant to understand the needs of young people.'* (AI 3) We think that it is important to acknowledge that the search for a holistic service can itself lead authorities to an illusion of a unified way of seeing, expressing, and understanding young adult's needs and strengths. A holistic service is dependent on working with the tensions implicit in any attempts to make it happen.

All this contributes to young peoples' sense of the *impossibility of influencing*. This became an important theme as part of the ongoing process of collective voicing when a group of young people created a performance called 'the impossibility of influencing rap'. We include an extract from a conversation between the researcher and one of the members of the group, who explains the thoughts and feelings that were part of the rap (Vignette 1).

#### VIGNETTE 1 'There are no mistakes in jazz': A conversation about the 'impossibility of influencing rap'

*The researcher (R) is talking with one of the young people (YP) involved in creating the 'impossibility of influencing rap'.*

YP: The original idea for creating the rap was the words 'impossibility of influencing' (referring to authorities). The subject had already come up in a few other ways.

R: How did the impossibility of influencing relate to your other activities?

YP: The words tell the experiences within the group. For example, loneliness and the need to come back towards people.

R: Who is the 'I' in the text? What kind of a life is s/he living?

YP: The rap says what I and other young people are feeling. The person in the rap wants to become independent and grow as an individual without other people's criticism. "I'm independent, others think it's lonely, but I personally see it so that I'm not the same as them." In the rap we talk about the pressures we are going through, like authorities asking us to try harder.

R: How is this push to try harder represented in the rap?

YP: Other people try to tell us what a good life is like and how I should live: go to work at a set time in the morning, get a house and children. The 'I' of the rap sees this way of life as unsatisfying.

R: Does rage, and dissatisfaction increase towards the end of the text?

YP: Yes, "You don't fucking notice your life is spinning on the same path?" The character in the rap wants their own way of living and does not feel that existing services provide an environment in which his or her choices are supported. The character is seen by authorities as not active enough.

R: What can those of us over 30 hear from the text?

YP: You can hear the voice of young people struggling with their independence and identity. The need to be noticed. You can hear the pain of the voice when the character gets the feeling of not trying hard enough.

R: What could youth services learn and understand from it?

YP: The rap voice takes a stand on how easily people imagine their own values, life philosophy, and worldview to be universal. The youth service could learn that the way a person lives is a choice that can be made, not a 'truth' that is given. The world is what it is, and we can find our own way by walking and choosing. You can't change everything, but you can change your attitude.

Authorities are trying to support and help us, but they should not focus on what is lacking about us or our mistakes. I would like them to have this kind of a perspective: There are no mistakes in jazz, there are just different notes, and each pattern produces new opportunities.

**Theme 2: Pseudo-neutrality and normalized empathy** – dehumanizing processes that are sustained through attempts to neutralize and normalize human services. Young people are generally seen by authorities as single service users, which limits the scope of their participation.

Any public service organization that engages with social issues must find ways to cope with the difficult emotions that such issues generate, as well as the ways in which these emotions impact on everyday ways of being and working. Authorities in our research developed what we are calling pseudo-neutrality and normalized empathy. Pseudo-neutrality arises from the positioning of young adults as a single service user. Each user is a different person with a different name and distinctive details within a database, at the same time as they are treated as the same unemployed person with the same problem. Authorities' empathy for the social issues they address is normalized onto an unemployed person, not a specific individual. Authorities simplified the needs of young people into a form of self-help. Therefore, the young people needed to *'sharpen themselves'*, while authorities were able to congratulate themselves for *'helping them to put the pieces together' and offering 'someone to lean on'*.

This gives rise to a detached and paternalistic enactment of the role where, as they take responsibility for young people, they also take responsibility away from them.



*'This image represents the idea of our work, our multi-professional team. We support young people to find their way. The core of our practice is that we are here for them, for young people, even though there is so much else to do. The lives of our customers can be a puzzle and we help them to put the pieces together. Even though there is sometimes distance between us and the customer, like in this image, we offer support, someone to lean on' (AI5).*

Vignette 2 illustrates aspects of young peoples' experience of the existing system. The two young people involved, Lilli and Laura, expressed what it feels like to be *'a name off their "activate unemployed people" list'* and discuss how this could be different.

**VIGNETTE 2** Our Experience with Youth Services – An episode from an artful inquiry with young people (October 2016)

*Two young people, Lilli and Laura, are sitting together. The researcher is sitting with them. They are talking about their experience of being unemployed and about the support they get from the services available to them (mental health, unemployment, social services, youth services).*

**Lilli:** 'I know authorities have their reasons why they act in the way they do. There was a time when even their calls felt scary to me. Nothing is enough from their perspective. Even though I tried hard it was not enough. I was doing the wrong things. I hope that the service can be more human and caring. I wish they would be kind to me and to other young people. I know they try their best. We are in the game of looking for work, any kind of a work, any kind of terms. It feels like we all want to be somewhere else other than this situation'.

'If only all the different employees from different agencies would talk more. They just want to pull my name off their 'activate unemployed people' list. Imagine if I could be part of profiling myself with the help of officers. Authorities see me as one case among other cases. Why can't they have what dentists have, a map where they can see my history, but where I can also write my own story. I can do all kinds of things and the map would show that we all have good things that should be considered. When you are exhausted, like I was suffering mental problems for several years and it took me time to get here where I am now. It is so hard to keep repeating your life situation to a different people. Like just this week I went again and explained again. I am wondering if I would write my story on a piece of paper so I would not always have to tell it again or what if my story would be digital and I would own and control it. The service should not stigmatize us. Challenges in life are temporary, like mine was. After a challenging stage of life comes another stage which can be full of possibilities and good stuff. The service should have this in its DNA'.

**Laura:** 'If I have a mental health problem, I will not want any of these authorities to see all the information about me. It is my stuff, my data. I would love it to be a whole picture of me. Like you Lilli, you are more than a number 64: case of mental problems. You can draw and paint. You are taking care of your granny. You have dreams. This cold data does not reflect any of that. I was wondering what if data could be created in a more shared way? Like that officer you met this week would say to you: "I'm reporting this way now, is this ok to you?" and then if needed you could change it. It would change according to how your life situation would change. It would be meaningful data'.

One of the scenes within young adults' dramatized videos<sup>1</sup> developed this theme. It depicts a local authority officer who, during an interview, looked at her computer screen rather than at the young person. She asks the question: '*so what is this case of yours?*' The young person feels that she must endlessly repeat what she has already said in previous meetings; and that she is likely to have to carry on having to repeat things indefinitely. The officer notes that the young person's data was missing from the IT system and that, therefore '*this case does not exist.*' As a result, the Officer says, '*I cannot help you anymore*' and advises that she needs to meet with a different officer. The dramatization shows a circular process, a loop where young people are asked to sit in the corridors to wait their turn to step into a room where different officers look at their computer screen and recommend seeing other

<sup>1</sup> Dramatized videos were created by some of the young people from their response to an artful inquiry about their experiences of encountering authorities in service situations. The following link provides an example: <http://www.artsequal.fi/-/virastovideo-kriittisten-ystavien-dialogiryhma> (uploaded 18 Oct 2018). It is in Finnish, but we think that the visuals translate quite easily.

people. Eventually, the young person ends up back where she started. The researcher watched this dramatization with experienced youth work practitioners and asked them what they saw about youth services in the video. They reflected... '*Have we created this ourselves?*' and '*I do recognize this*'. They thought that it should be a core part of designing services to be aware of such dynamics, of the consequences of the prioritization of the needs of an IT system over the needs of the young people the system was designed to serve. Pseudo-neutrality undermines both the officer's role and the young person's own sense of worth.

➤➤ Pseudo-neutrality undermines both the officer's role and the young person's own sense of worth.

**Theme 3: Dispositions of agency** – prevailing assumptions within services for young people privilege IT/ digital systems, measurement systems, and the accommodation of political/ performance pressures. The emphasis on technology and measurement reduces the perceived importance of young peoples' agency and implies that their participation is not required.

We found that authorities were constrained in their agency by an overly rational and incremental notion of the main tasks that define their work. They described what they do as a service chain, and '*each sequence of service chain has specific task.*' In addition, differences between parts of the public sector (youth work, social care, health care, study guidance) were informed by different values, norms, and practices. This meant that authorities' values were questioned by other authorities, making them more defensive and less inclined to reflect for themselves. Under these circumstances, it was increasingly difficult for

authorities to reflect on their own agency, let alone to understand better how to support young persons' agency. The prioritization of IT systems, measurement and political imperatives creates a rationalized and defended position from which it becomes more and more difficult to deliver meaningful improvements or to create spaces within which to listen to young people.

For some of the young people in the research their agency *'doesn't exist'* (AI 1) because authorities were preoccupied with the service system in preference to young persons' lives. What was meaningful to the young people in the study was the core of their life values. Emotions related with unemployment thus became associated with the young unemployed, not with the authorities. The young people felt *'lost'* in the system, that they were there *'without being noticed' or 'not being heard'*. The research showed that emotions associated with unemployment were powerful for everybody involved in attempts to address the issue. However, in practice, these emotions were primarily located with the young unemployed themselves.



Feeling lost in the system: Such feelings block both young people and authorities from their agency in the system.

*"This character is me in this system. This character expresses the feelings of all of us young people who do not feel like we are one of the winners."*

*"This character is also any of the authorities around young people. They are also in this system, playing their role."*



The more that authorities focused on the rational task of supporting young people through the system, the more the young people found themselves positioned as the unfortunate unemployed.

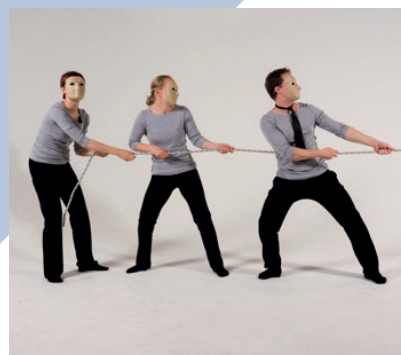
Authorities' defenses against emotion reinforced a split between provider and recipient. The more that authorities focused on the rational task of supporting young people through the system, the more the young people found themselves positioned as the unfortunate unemployed. Young persons' agency and participation in the development of services designed for them is practically impossible from this position. The focus on rational tasks was amplified by authorities fear of central government Ministries. They imagined that the Ministries would ask *'how are things really going over here'* and speculated that they would be *'wondering if they ever managed to do what they were expected to do'* (AI 3). They expressed concern about pressures, for example: *'There is a such a huge demand for various things. How is it possible to develop one-stop-guidance-centers when there are so many who want to take over?'* (AI 3). They were afraid of failing because their *'mission is so demanding'*. (AI 4). Their fears and concerns became the focus of the service, not the young people. This made them ambivalence about change. They were wary: *'one tries not to not insult anyone or shake existing hierarchy'* and they were concerned both to maintain the existing system and to ensure that any new way of working could *'join with the same system it has always been'*. (AI 3).

The research also showed authorities what they were missing. In Vignette 3 we give an example of the importance of young peoples' agency and the contribution that they can make to changing the service through giving voice to their experience. There was a disparity between authorities rational and distanced approach to young people and the young peoples' creativity and enthusiasm for a different approach.

**VIGNETTE 3** Identifying a ‘character’ to represent young people: An example of the potential in young peoples’ contribution to young peoples’ experience in the system

In the collective voicing and co-creation workshops, young people reflected on their participation and agency in youth services and in society. Four young women and the researcher were lying on the floor in the workshop room. Previously, they have spoken about their experiences of encountering authorities and they created characters based on their experiences. They identified several open questions from the perspectives of both young people and authorities. Tina is one of young people and she asks: *‘What if we try to identify what has been done and said in the past to put together something solid that we would like discussed?’* Rita continues: *‘It could be a kind of manifesto which could be discussed in a session with authorities.’* Jane suggests: *‘We could use that mapping technique we have used before?’* Tina: *Yes, let’s sketch a path of life – or the character’s life we are now building – and add our experiences into it. For example, what kind of encounters and issues will she have?* The young women talk and draw and use the theatrical images to build a map where an imaginary character represents their own experiences. It takes time and when the path is ready, they form questions and include twists and turns to the path.

**Theme 4: Performance measurement as ‘a false productivity’** – authorities ‘clean’ the statistics and manage out unwanted emotions from the system to reflect a well-operating service. Measurement does not involve, it assesses. Participation is marginalized by performance measurement.



*‘We are the solution providers here. We are trying to solve a very challenging problem. It is the question to whom are we providing solutions? For young people it might be different from the indicators with which we are measuring our actions. Surely, you get what you measure. For example, if you are counting the numbers of young people who gained employment, you might think that it is beneficial to put the young people into six-months of government supported work so that the listing will be cleaned. Surely we do this with the ethos of helping young people?’*

**>>> They are not without awareness of ‘how awkward, painful it is to reflect’ and that considerable effort would be required to change the organization in ways that can encourage participation from young people.**

Authorities face a continuous demand to produce innovative solutions within a short period and with limited resources. They rely on performance measurement to provide evidence of meeting this demand because *‘you get what you measure’*. Authorities were aware that their indicators lead their designs (rather than the designs giving rise to appropriate indicators). They were open about creating *‘a false productivity’* based on a political need to make the service (look) efficient (AI 3 and 4). In a political culture structured by fear of central government Ministries; by concerns about the pressures on themselves and the organization; their fears of failing; their wariness and ambivalence about change, it is not surprising that counting and labelling became their primary evaluative tools. However, authorities are not cynical manipulators of the system. Rather, they fall into positions of protecting themselves from their fears and pressures. They recognize that they are part of a game (of sorts) and find themselves both willingly and unwillingly playing it. They are not without awareness of *‘how awkward, painful it is to reflect’* (AI 3) and that considerable effort would be required to change the organization in ways that can encourage participation from young people. For example:

*‘I recognize the professional identity of making young people less than they are, marginalizing and patronizing them. This kind of an identity emphasizes our professionalism of being expert in supporting and helping marginalized young people. Experts who take responsibility for unemployed young people. Why are we always maintaining a helper-assisted relationship with a serious mode of being worried? What else could we be?’* (AI 3).

We do not see these themes as an unusual representation of the emotional and political dynamics of public service bureaucracies. Indeed, we think that the defenses, tensions, projective relations, and intensities of feeling that we have highlighted are common aspects of peoples' lived experience within them. However, we think that the significance of our findings is in being able to identify the potential of these dynamics to *both* promote and prevent participation. We develop this further in our discussion.

## DISCUSSION

In this paper we study emotional and organizational dynamics that are integral to the development and avoidance of young peoples' participation in the services designed for them. We argue that engaging with the *perplexity* within the system is an important factor in improving both providers' and users' understanding of participation. We explore individual and social defenses against participation; as well as how improved involvement can be supported by working through such defenses using arts-based methods. In our 'Narrative 1' (above) one of the youth workers, on hearing about the arts-based approach to the research said, '*we told her (the researcher) that we do not need to dance or sing or paint.*' Our research suggests that making a song and dance of things (or perhaps in this case – a rap and a video) is exactly what is needed to address individual and social defenses against participation. The feelings that authorities had to move beyond to participate in the artful inquiries mirror the feelings that they must move beyond to comprehend participation. For the young people, an arts-based approach to the research provided a space to find and communicate their individual and collective voice.

We suggest that perplexity provides a conceptual focal point through which to comprehend emotions and defenses generated by attempts to implement participation. This can be applied to a persistent tension within services for young people, between a genuine desire to improve participation and emotional responses and behaviour that undermine it. Our view is that too much emphasis has been placed on rational and instrumental approaches to young peoples' involvement in services, and that this undermines what is possible. We think that exploration of the perplexity in the system can help us to understand both theory and practice in the context of young peoples' participation. Our analysis identified two areas for theoretical development. These are: the mixed emotions that perpetuate tensions and reinforce defenses; and contextually specific moments of emotional engagement when defenses can be transformed. Our theory-building links to a third area of development, which is the potential of perplexity as a heuristic based on arts-pedagogy. Our arts-based methods have informed this heuristic, creating opportunities for participative learning as a medium for learning about participation.

### *Perplexity and mixed emotions*

We coined the term *perplexity* to represent the emotional complexity of persons' lived experience of public service organizations. Our approach relates to others who have identified emotional complexity and mixed emotions as areas for scholarly development (Ashkanasy, Humphrey and Huy, 2017; Rothman and Melwani, 2017). Ashkanasy, Humphrey and Huy (2017: 178) define emotional complexity as 'the simultaneous experience of at least two different emotional states during the same emotional episode.'

We have a different, more systemic emphasis. We understand perplexity as involving mixed emotions (often including more than one emotional state) that are bound up with contextually specific politics or power relations that help to maintain self-limiting structural and behavioral dispositions. Perplexity is one way of representing the continuous interplay between peoples' emotions and the organizational structures in which they are contained. For example, we illustrate how the lived experiences of young people, local managers, leaders, and policy makers are tied together by the emotional complexity of their different (but related) experiences. These both shape and are shaped by individual and social defenses that create and sustain perplexity within the system.

In the organizations we studied, mixed emotions within an overtly political context led to the impulse to control excessively, and to the trivialization of young peoples' participation. Authorities could use their professional power to project fear, ambivalence, and defensiveness onto young people without owning these feelings; or having to recognize and engage with young peoples' responses. Specifically, we found that tensions inherent in attempts to develop services with and for young people generated perplexities that undermined young peoples' meaningful participation. Authorities had mixed feelings about young peoples' participation, for example, because it makes a demanding job more complex. Young people had mixed feelings about participation in situations where they did not believe that it would make a difference.

One possibility provided by the idea of perplexity is that such feelings are about contextual aspects of the *relatedness* between people and systems; and that the tensions they produce have creative as well as defensive potential. We have used systems psychodynamic theory to frame our study because it is concerned with the emotional containment and restriction that is created in the interaction

>> Perplexity is one way of representing the continuous interplay between peoples' emotions and the organizational structures in which they are contained.

between collective structures and norms, and the emotions and cognitions of members of those collectives (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020). Our analysis showed us how professional perspectives and actions that were meant to include young people tended to exclude them. In our study, mixed emotions experienced by authorities joined with young peoples' emotional experience of services. We have identified a context specific process of social defense against young peoples' participation based on four interrelated tensions. Authorities project fears onto young people as a defense against inclusion, and the effort it involves. Young people internalize and reinterpret these fears through their own experiences of services.

Social defenses are reinforced by positioning young people as a single service user to simplify emotions and experiences within the system. This is further reinforced by overplaying the technical and underemphasizing the relational aspects of services. We refer to the outcome of this process as a 'false productivity' because it leads to political games with performance measurement, and it undermines productive engagement with and from young people. This process puts much in the way of participation.

An important aspect of our contribution to systems psychodynamic theory is that we link social defenses with mixed emotions. In this way we offer a more complex (more perplexing) picture of the working of defenses and emotions in organizations. In our study it is not only the case that social defenses emerge against the anxieties generated within and by the system. They are created and sustained by a mixture of emotions (e.g., fear, ambivalence, a desire to

help); bound together with contextually specific power relations (e.g., the four interconnected tensions we identified); and reinforced by self-limiting structures (e.g., ‘false productivity’ and ‘pseudo-commitment’). If we want to better understand how individuals and collectives are emotionally connected in organizations, then our view is that perplexity, as we define it, can offer one focal point through which to analyze the relatedness between emotion and power, people, and systems.

In terms of future research, we think that perplexity extends the notion of emotional complexity beyond the idea that it represents the simultaneous experience of at least two different emotional states (Askanasy, Humphrey and Huy, 2017). Our research proposes that emotional complexity involves the experience of different emotional states, but also that these states are intimately bound up with contextually specific social relations. This suggests a further avenue for research in emotion and organizations. It indicates the importance of studying mixed emotions. Existing research has tended to focus on the impact of single emotions on organizational and institutional order. For example, ‘shame’ in the context of the Christian ministry (Creed et al, 2014); ‘fear’ within haute-cuisine kitchens (Gill and Burrow, 2018); and ‘anger’ in human rights organizations (Rodgers, 2010). However, social emotions – emotions that are particularly relevant to the state of social relations, that hold groups or communities together in distinctive processes and relationships (Creed et al, 2014) – are not experienced in isolation, even if they are pivotal in helping to coordinate and maintain relationships. It seems to us that it will be important to discover more about how mixed emotions are integral to our lived experience of organizations, as well as the ways in which they are attached to social emotions like shame, fear, or anger. A key question for the study of mixed emotions in this paper is: what should scholars be looking for to identify perplexity? In the following section we develop an answer to this question.



➤➤ If we want to better understand how individuals and collectives are emotionally connected in organizations, then our view is that perplexity, as we define it, can offer one focal point through which to analyze the relatedness between emotion and power, people, and systems.

#### *Emotional engagement: Identifying the ‘Härdelli’<sup>2</sup> or ‘Hässäkkä’ Moments*

Qualitative research on emotion and lived experience in organizations searches for ‘striking moments’ that underpin participant learning (Corlett, 2013; Cunliffe, 2002). Through telling and recalling experiences together, research participants become aware of their ways of talking, acting and being (Cunliffe, 2002), thereby revealing tensions, differences, and defenses within a specific organizational context, and opening the potential for learning and change. Arts-based approaches are particularly useful for the identification of moments of feeling and knowing (Linstead, 2018). These moments might be aesthetic (we are drawn out of ourselves and into associated feeling, sensation or affect); poetic (powerful realizations of the significance of experience – either direct or recalled); ethical (a moment of connection with and a sense of responsibility towards the experience of the other); and political (the moment when *‘difference becomes visible, audible or tangible as inequality, divergence of interests, and disparities of power, even suppression and oppression – raising questions of conflict and change’*, Linstead, 2018: 333, italics in the original).

<sup>2</sup> Härdelli is a Finnish word which (more or less) translates as turmoil or disorder. In situational terms it can be understood as an imbroglio (‘an unwanted, difficult, and confusing situation, full of trouble and problems’ – Cambridge Online Dictionary). It also connects to the Finnish word ‘hässäkkä’, which translates as hassle.

We have no doubt that the public sector organizations we studied genuinely wish to break down siloed structures, and to prepare young people with skills that are useful in their future working lives. However, to improve participation and focus on the development of services for young people, it is necessary to listen to and take seriously young peoples' experiences of attempts to participate within the system. This is more difficult than organizational members have so far imagined. We have identified processes of exclusory inclusion, pseudo-neutrality, restricted agency, and false productivities as four key elements that sustain limitations on participation and arise from the interplay between emotion and organizational politics. Our research suggests that the identification of perplexity, wherever it is experienced, is in part the result of recognizing what we refer to as 'hårdelli' moments.

We are using the Finnish word *hårdelli* for two reasons. First, our research context is the public sector in Finland, and we believe that the phrase 'hårdelli moment' will be easily understood by both practitioners and young people within this context. Second, we could not find an English equivalent that captured situations in which authorities became afraid that their apparent desire to progress participation will unsettle their work to the point of undermining it. Certainly, the term *imbroglio* describes unwanted and confusing situations that give rise to perplexity, but it is not a commonly used word, and it seems more orientated to scholars than to practitioners.

>> Our research suggests that the identification of perplexity, wherever it is experienced, is in part the result of recognizing what we refer to as 'hårdelli' moments.

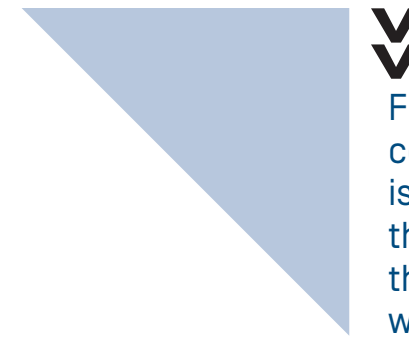


>> Arts-based methods offered young people an opportunity to articulate their experiences associated with the confusions of the service system.

Youth education has tended to focus on informal learning (making sense of the world, improving relationships) more than on young persons' perspectives on the seemingly incomprehensible organizational context in which they find themselves. Arts-based methods offered young people an opportunity to articulate their experiences associated with the confusions of the service system. As we indicated in our findings section, participant groups used video to explore their experience of power and powerlessness. They scripted, acted in, filmed, and edited the video themselves. In the example we provided, a group of young people cleverly captured an endless loop of repetitive instructions that they are obliged to follow when trying to navigate the service system. Since it was made, this video has been used as an artefact with youth educators and youth officers for critical reflection on the organization of youth services and young peoples' participation. The video serves as an illustration of the emotional complexities of young peoples' experience, and as a stimulus for reflection on service design and delivery.

We have argued that a focus on the perplexity mobilised within a system offers a new way of understanding complex emotional dynamics within organizations, and their individual and collective effects. Within our empirical context, this has practical implications for improvements in young persons' emotional attachment to services, and through this to the relevance of services and their participation within them. Our analysis also showed that the mixed emotions that give rise to tensions can be productive. For example, instead of authorities determining the bureaucratic nature of services, the focus can be on the extent to which young peoples' voices might unsettle established practices. From this perspective, tensions are likely both to help maintain confusion and to provide a way in which confusion can be transformed. Studying young peoples' emotional experience of public services has led to the creation of an *art-pedagogy* that can improve and sustain their participation in the development of services designed for them. Art-pedagogy provides a creative process through which it is possible to imagine different ways of enabling participation; and to perceive the differences of experience and expectation that young people bring to participation. This does not mean that the tensions that result from different roles (service user, local manager, policy maker) are removed. Rather, they are acknowledged as a part of how young peoples' participation is both encouraged and discouraged at the same time.

➤➤ Art-pedagogy provides a creative process through which it is possible to imagine different ways of enabling participation;



Finding ways to keep communication open is important for sustaining the balance between the very different perspectives within the system.

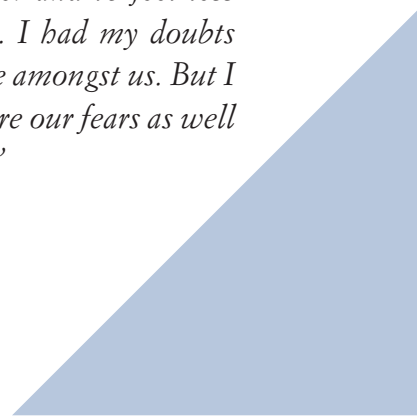
We are not certain that any approach will succeed completely in enabling young peoples' experiences within the system to be heard and taken seriously. However, we have found that art-pedagogy offers one way to encourage voice and to improve participation. One of the values of art-pedagogy as an approach to the development of participation is that it provides a creative space to identify the emotional and political contradictions inherent in the systems in which both authorities and young people participate. In practical terms, it invites and encourages all involved to explore how their different experiences relate to different strategic needs, resources, and outcomes. We can see the potential for the development of dual strategies – seemingly contradictory approaches to service delivery that are mobilized simultaneously (Heracleous and Wirtz, 2014). Such an approach means taking the risk to believe that young people make a meaningful contribution to the nature of the services they need. This would also begin to solve persistent problems associated with authorities' impulse to control and the consequent trivialization of young peoples' participation. Finding ways to keep communication open is important for sustaining the balance between the very different perspectives within the system.

There are many instrumental guides on participation in organizations. We are steering clear of claiming that we have also developed a guide. We believe that we have developed a heuristic that offers the opportunity for practitioners to openly engage with the contradictions and ongoing tensions of service design and development. We recommend art-pedagogy as a process for revealing and negotiating key issues of youth participation without claiming that this process resolves these issues. Our emphasis is on conversations between authorities

and young people that maximize the possibility of learning to act, behave and organize differently. We are aware of the political issues, both National and local, that easily subvert the practical implementation of young peoples' participation in service design and development. Our suggestion is that one of the values of art-pedagogy as an approach to the development of participation is that it provides a creative space to identify moments when authorities and young adults are feeling confused, awkward, and hassled within and by the systems in which they participate.

The research produced benefits for authorities and young people. First, improved awareness of the tensions that underpinned government policy on young peoples' participation provided a context and a method for reflection and dialogue. For example, one of the regional coordinators noted that:

*'Your own motivation and belief that we will find innovative solutions is tested all the time. But this type of arts-based reflection allowed us to imagine future scenarios together and to feel less paralyzed when navigating difficult situations. I had my doubts about this session and how to organize dialogue amongst us. But I feel that we managed to discuss, listen, and share our fears as well as our dreams in both serious and playful ways'*  
(Collective Voicing, June 2018)



For the first time, service providers and young people had access to a process through which they could make sense of services together; and think through opportunities for development. Second, the research emphasized the significance of embedding learning processes into service development, and it showed the relevance of collaboration with education services (vocational education, the open university, and high schools). More emphasis has been placed on 'learning paths' that support further education opportunities along



...one of the value of art-pedagogy as an approach to the development of participation is that it provides a creative space to identify moments when authorities and young adults are feeling confused, awkward, and hassled within and by the systems in which they participate.

gside a focus on securing employment. Finally, the idea of collective voicing has been expanded to provide arts-based activities from young people to young people. Some of the young people, along with an artist, have established an activist group that has received funding from the Finnish government. The group is organizing an urban festival (Summer 2021) where the core idea is for young people to think and talk about Finnish society through artistic processes. The artist works as a mentor to the activist group. She emphasizes

that: *'I am there to help and support the group; to help them find ways of organizing participatory processes for other young people'*. Such developments are encouraging. However, public service organizations will not stop being complex, defended, and highly politicized environments. There are no easy solutions, and participation remains a challenge that requires engagement rather than avoidance.

## CONCLUSION

The desire to improve participation can be challenged by the very organizational behaviors and structures that intend to enable it. The theoretical puzzle we have addressed in this paper concerns how to identify and engage with emotions, tensions, and defenses embedded in services that simultaneously encourage and discourage participation. We coined the term *perplexity* to represent the emotional complexity that was mobilised by an attempt to foster the participation of young people within the services designed for them. Our analysis encourages scholars and practitioners to explore individual and social defenses against participation. Perplexity provides a conceptual focal point through which to engage with a persistent tension within services for young people, between a genuine desire to improve participation and emotional responses and behaviour that undermine it. Too much emphasis has been placed on rational and instrumental approaches to young peoples' involvement in services, and this undermines what is possible. Paying attention to mixed emotions that perpetuate tensions and reinforce defenses is an important element in working through them. Such attention leads to contextually specific moments of emotional engagement when defenses can be transformed. We position the notion of perplexity as a heuristic based on arts-pedagogy, one that creates opportunities for participative learning as a medium for learning about participation.

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Guide to methods and practice from the research:  
*Using Arts-based Methods in Science Communication.pdf*

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