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The Role of the Local Community in Promoting Discursive Participation: A Reflection on Elderly People's Meetings in a Small Rural Community in Finland

Abstract

This paper explores how elderly residents' discursive participation is promoted through the local community in one Finnish municipality. It introduces the case of the Elderly People's Forum as an interesting example of a self-initiated, informal participatory forum that has established a role in local governance and continuously inspires the wide discursive participation of elderly residents in public discussions. Drawing on the concept of discursive participation, which includes talk in informal settings about matters of common interest as a measure of civic engagement, I argue that by acknowledging the deliberative potential of self-initiated civil society forums, local governance can enhance residents' ongoing participation and possibilities to exert influence.

Author Biography

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Keywords

discursive participation, local community, public deliberation

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Introduction

The Elderly People's Forum began following one retiree's idea of having informal discussions over a cup of coffee on current topics related to community life and elderly people's interests. This retiree published an announcement in a local newspaper and a few fellow retirees gathered at a local café in the small rural municipality of Säkyä, Western Finland. Now, four years later, these monthly meetings continually bring together around a hundred retirees at the council hall to discuss municipal services. The Elderly People's Forum has proved to be an important participatory forum for elderly residents to meet, learn about others' life situations, identify shared concerns, and get their views heard in local decision-making. The local authorities utilize this event to inform elderly residents about decisions or actions affecting them and to gather information about their opinions and needs. The Elderly People's Forum has established its role as an informal participatory forum in local governance. By acknowledging the deliberative potential of this self-initiated forum and providing a few resources, the municipality has enhanced its elderly residents' participation.

In this paper, I offer insights into the discursive properties and possibilities of a small-scale instance of informal deliberation and discursive participation in local settings by reflecting on the case of the Elderly People's Forum. Furthermore, I argue for the potential of informal public discussions in different arenas of civil society to foster ongoing, inclusive, and diverse styles of participation.

In Finland, the municipalities are responsible for promoting the wellbeing of their residents and organizing social and health care services. Strengthening residents' discursive participation has an instrumental role in these local welfare practices. Participatory and deliberative processes produce nuanced knowledge of residents' welfare needs in a specific area, and help to identify and meet individual needs with greater accuracy (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Evans, Marsh, & Stoker, 2013). Finnish administrative and political discourse emphasizes the participatory and communicative qualities of municipal democracy and the generation of wide-ranging opportunities for all concerned to exercise influence in local decision-making. When discussing the promotion of well-being, whether concerning the services of a specific group or the municipality as a living environment in general, local councils must ensure that all residents have the opportunity to participate in the definition of topical issues and the design, implementation, and evaluation of the welfare activities (Local Government Act, 2015). In Finland, residents' opportunities to participate and exert influence are furthered through a variety of direct and participatory practices, such as local resident panels, citizen juries, and participatory budgeting. However, participatory actions do not always achieve the objectives set concerning the representativeness of the views of all concerned,

policy impacts, and sustainability. Deliberative forums are also noted to be time-consuming and expensive. (e.g. Stenvall, Vakkala, & Sandberg, 2017; Värttö, Raisio, & Roivainen, 2015.) Nevertheless, it is important to find inspiring, cost-effective, and representative local participatory practices that further residents' ongoing opportunities to participate and exert influence.

Growing numbers of researchers and practitioners argue for the potential of informal public discussions and the discursive participation of citizens talking together in discrete arenas of civil society to contribute to inclusive and democratic decision-making (Dryzek, 1990, 2000; Hartz-Karp & Sullivan, 2014; Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Carpini, 2009; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). Through discursive participation, individuals can develop and express their opinions, become aware of others' points of view, identify shared concerns or preferences, and form shared views on communal issues (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). It has been suggested that, while formal top-down participatory forums are often issue-specific, initiated by authorities, and based on a sample of participants brought together for one occasion only (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008), discursive participation and informal public discussions in different arenas of the civil society may foster more ongoing, and inclusive participation, in addition to creating self-managed discussions that bring new issues to the table while requiring fewer resources to reach participants (Dodge, 2009, 2010, 2015; Fischer, 2006; Hartz-Karp & Sullivan, 2014; Levine & Nierras, 2007). In relation to these arguments, the Elderly People's Forum provides an interesting example of an informal forum that continuously inspires wide participation and engages elderly residents in discursive action. What makes this forum a specifically interesting case is its popularity, its representativeness, and its established and recognized status in the eyes of the local authorities.

To construct a more in-depth understanding of the Elderly People's Forum, interviews were conducted with the forum's organizers and a group of five participants. In addition, observation data were compiled from two meetings and a diary log provided by the forum's founder. These were gathered during a development and research project that studied potential ways of strengthening citizen participation in the promotion of wellbeing in the municipality of Säkyälä, Western Finland. Säkyälä is a small rural municipality with fewer than 7,000 residents, 28.1 per cent of which are over 64 years old (Statistics Finland, 2017).

At its outset, our project organized participatory events such as citizen juries and discussions. However, compared to the resources used, it was challenging to get residents to attend these events. Furthermore, those who participated were typically already active in many other forums. These single participatory events also only

formed detached moments of participation. In the face of these challenges, our project turned to study the discursive functions of self-initiated civil society functions, such those of the Elderly People's Forum. The following section of this paper describes the Elderly People's Forum in greater detail. Following some reflections on the theoretical viewpoints of discursive participation, it then describes how this specific forum enhances ongoing citizen engagement and addresses the issues of inclusiveness, representativeness, and the process of mediating residents' views in decision-making and practice.

A Detailed Overview of the Elderly People's Forum

The main purpose of the Elderly People's Forum is to provide information about elderly people's services and wellbeing and to organize leisure activities and social interaction for elderly residents. The meetings take place at the council hall once a month. The two-hour meetings start with coffee, and time is given for the participants' informal discussions. People often arrive three quarters of an hour before the actual programme starts to chat over a cup of coffee. This informal part is followed by the planned programme, which varies from informational expert lectures about elderly people's services and wellbeing to cultural or sport activities. Expert lectures often raise discussions among the participants, and they have the opportunity to ask the presenting expert questions and share their views and ideas. Self-organized meetings are currently organized in cooperation with the municipality's geriatrician and elderly volunteers from the Older People's Council. According to Finnish law on elderly people's services in Finland, a municipality must found an Older People's Council with representatives from the retirees' own associations and the municipality. This council must be included in the planning, decision-making, and evaluation of all municipal issues related to older people, such as social and health services, and city planning. Having representation both from the municipality and the council provides the organizers of the Elderly People's Forum with wide networks to mediate the views expressed in the meetings to the municipal council, and other local authorities, and civil society.

In terms of inclusiveness, the Elderly People's Forum is successfully generating the wide engagement of people from different backgrounds. Participation appears strongly self-motivated. The interviewees reported that the chief motivational factor underlying participation in the Elderly People's Forum is acquiring practical information. The meetings provide lectures and information across varied aspects of elderly people's everyday life, such as health and welfare services, care homes, traffic safety and driving license renewal, exercise and nutrition, and memory and ageing. By participating, elderly citizens from many different life situations acquire information that may prove to be directly useful and valuable in their personal life.

Another significant motivational aspect emphasized by all the interviewees is meaningful social interaction and the respect of individual preferences. Elderly people attend the forum to meet others and share experiences of everyday life, municipal services, and their living environment. Consequently, the conversations shared over the cups of coffee and the thoughts shared on the expert lectures are based on the participants' personal experiences. The informal and voluntary nature of the discussions constitutes participation without pressure. The self-generated discussions among the participants do not require skills to articulate interests regarding a specific public topic or a particular political understanding that could place participants in unequal positions, as has been found in some studies in relation to formal deliberations (Levine & Nierras, 2007). Participants may also become informed about the discussions without feeling pressure to actively engage. As one interviewee said: "You do not have to socialize with others. Engaging in a conversation can sometimes be a rather obnoxious idea to some of us. At the Elderly People's Forum, someone may visit several times just to attend the lectures, enjoy the coffee, and listen to the conversations." To summarize, providing practical information and enabling diverse styles of engagement enhances the attractivity, accessibility and inclusiveness of this forum.

Of course, including a greater number of retirees does not ensure that the views formed by the participants actually represent the views of the retirees in the municipality as a whole. However, the Elderly People's Forum goes a considerable way towards representing varied views, generating reflective and empathetic discussions that also consider the non-participants' interests. According to the organizers, the elderly people participating in the meetings often voice concerns about those not present and consider the interests of others when discussing elderly people's services. For example, they have shared their concerns about elderly neighbours living alone with health issues and limited mobility, asking the geriatrician to visit such people. When discussions have covered services provided in the town centre, the participants have raised the question of accessibility for those living in rural parts without access to public transportation. This could be characterized as "deliberation within," where the participating citizens rely on their internal reflective abilities and empathetically take into account the needs of non-participants, consequently making more people discursively present and participatory in the minds of those holding the discussion (Goodin, 2003). Deliberation, from the perspective of deliberation from within, does not rest upon direct interpersonal exchanges alone; it requires the citizens' awareness and ability to reflect upon the different life situations of others. Goodin (2003) argues that there are many institutions and functions promoting peoples' awareness of others' life situations, such as cultural institutions, media, and activities that facilitate social mixing. The Elderly People's Forum generates awareness and empathetic thinking

with informative lectures about varied issues concerning elderly people and, as noted by the interviewees, it brings together people who would not normally engage with each other.

I next address the issue of mediating elderly people's views into decision-making and other spheres of the community. The deliberative potential of the Elderly People's Forum is acknowledged by the participants, the organizers, and the municipal authorities. The organizers are promoting the elderly residents' ability to participate in decision-making by providing them with valid and comprehensible information about municipal services. One of the representatives of the Older People's Council described how expert lectures and visits from local authorities are organized to explain public issues to the elderly in more detail in order to further their awareness and comprehension of these issues and support meaningful participation: "Some read about these issues in the local paper, but don't necessarily understand what they mean in practice."

Within the formal programme of the Elderly People's Forum, time is assigned for self-generated discussions. Through talking with each other about their experiences, elderly people have identified relevant issues beyond their individual interest and preferences. As the following excerpt from a conversation between three participants demonstrates, these informal conversations may in fact produce shared views on matters of common interest. Undoubtedly, one of the most important aspects of discursive participation is how it is perceived by the participants. The conversation illustrates that the participants have indeed acknowledged that the Elderly People's Forum provides a grounding for collective discussions and action:

Participant A: And there's a doctor's appointment that I ought to get, too.

Participant B: Those seem to be harder and harder to get.

Participant C: For many years, one got the appointment almost the same day one called, but now it takes too long.

Participant B: We ought to do something and ask the service director to come here some time to explain why this has changed.

Participant C: This is what we can make an initiative about!

After this exchange, the retirees in question presented their idea of inviting the service director to the meeting to the organizers of the Elderly People's Forum. Another participant talking about the meaning of the discussions in the meetings said the following: "We have indeed given all sorts of feedback. Of course, you are aware that not everything is possible or in the hands of the individual

decision-makers, but some effects can be seen in practice. It's not just useless talk. Also, it helps when you can articulate your worries publicly.”

In the next example, one participant states that municipalities should understand the ability of such arenas as the Elderly People's Forum to bring people together using limited resources: “I think it would be really good to reproduce this in many municipalities. In the end, this is a very light organization for the municipality, but it really brings people together.” These examples illustrate that although the main motivating factor for participation is social interaction and the acquisition of useful information, the elderly people also recognize the meaning of discursive participation and the opportunities presented by collective discussion during the forum's meetings.

The local authorities have themselves become increasingly aware of the potential of the Elderly People's Forum for promoting participation. Due to the sheer numbers of people participating, the local authorities managing the elderly people's services utilize the meetings to effectively reach and inform elderly residents about municipal services and gather information about their opinions and needs through opinion polls and discussions. According to the organizers, the flow of information has indeed improved in both directions. Interestingly, the representatives of the Older People's Council pointed out that the political decision-making body, the municipal council, has not acknowledged the potential of the meeting to the same extent as the professional management. Thus, the professional management is acknowledging and utilizing the deliberative potential of the meetings more effectively than the municipality's political management. This gap between the meetings' mediating capabilities in terms of influencing practices or formal decision-making is met by the organizers' embedded networks. Some concerns were expressed concerning whether the mediating capability rests too much with the organizers' personal networks and contacts and their personal commitment. Nevertheless, the organizers perceived the mediating capability to be more strongly embedded in the representative nature of the professional role (for the geriatrician) or the institutional role (for the representatives of the Older People's Council) and therefore not attached to them only personally.

In consideration of formal decision-making, the issues raised within the Elderly People's Forum – ranging from service needs to the placement of benches in the parks – are mediated to the municipal council through the Older People's Council. The greater representation at the Elderly People's Forum has empowered the Older People's Council in this case municipality. A comment from the representative of the Older People's Council illustrates this by emphasizing the importance of issues being raised through the citizens' discursive participation and collective

deliberations: “This way, the municipality learns what the elderly people want and need and how their services are perceived. They get immediate feedback if something is wrong. Most importantly, the municipality does not receive feedback from a single individual, but through collective participation; when the council takes a stand on these issues as well, it is viewed as having greater importance by the municipality.”

Furthermore, some of the ideas and needs are taken into account directly by the elderly people’s service providers and third-sector operatives; discursive inputs thus influence services and decision-making through the local democratic processes and in other spheres of community and civil society. In terms of directly influencing the practices and services for elderly people, the role of the municipality’s geriatrician appears instrumental. Through her engagement at the meetings, she gains knowledge that is directly useful in her own work and the work of those with whom she cooperates, and consequently, the Elderly People’s Forum has practically influenced services for elderly residents. For example, after hearing a presentation about library services in the municipality, the idea of a ‘book basket service’ was raised: elderly care assistants could take books with them on home visits to elderly people who cannot not access the library. The idea presented by the participants was put to the library and the service was operational after only a week. To summarize, the organizers have embedded networks to mediate discourses for decision-making and practice.

Conclusions: Five Characteristics Promoting Discursive Participation

In this paper, I have explored how elderly residents’ participation is promoted in one Finnish local community. The Elderly People’s Forum provides an interesting example of an informal and self-initiated forum that engages elderly residents in municipal decision-making. By acknowledging the deliberative potential of this civil society forum and by providing only limited resources, the municipality has enhanced the elderly residents’ ongoing participation in public deliberations.

Other municipalities have attempted to replicate the concept of the Elderly People’s Forum, but the same level of engagement and participation has not been achieved elsewhere. The ability of any instance to promote discursive participation is, ultimately, two-fold: firstly, it must be able to boost wide participation and representative creation of collective views of communal issues, and secondly, it must be able to influence decision-making and practice. What characteristics could then be found in the Elderly People’s Forum that help addressing these challenges? Five characteristics appear important.

First, participation is strongly self-motivated. It is based on individuals own interests and acquiring personally practical information and the motivational factor of taking part in interesting leisure and social activities. Second, the discussions are accessible and enable diverse styles of participation. When residents meet, share their views and identify common concerns, the meetings enable naturally-forming discussions about communal issues. These self-generated discussions among the participants do not require skills to articulate interests regarding a specified public topic that could lead participants to shy away from participating. In addition, not everyone actively talks in discussions, but they are still taking part by being present and hearing different points of view as well as the information from municipal visitors. The informal and voluntary nature of the discussions constitute accessible participation. Third, meetings facilitate social mixing enabling reflective and empathetic discussions that take into account interests of non-participants. Diversity of the program and topics in these meetings prompt enthusiasm and participation of people from different backgrounds and life situations. Through this social mixing and informative lectures about varied issues concerning different life situations of the group in question, participants become informed about different interests and points of view. Fourth, the deliberative potential of this event is acknowledged by all parties. Local authorities and service providers recognize the meetings as a forum to reach a wide audience and the participants recognize the opportunities to discuss and make initiatives and to be heard. Without this shared acknowledgment, collective discussions would constitute as just talk. Fifth, the organizers have embedded networks crossing over different sectorial borders to mediate the discourses for decision-making and practice. Embedded, in this case means that the organizers have professional, institutional and representative connections to municipal council as well as public and third sector service providers and professionals.

I present next, how these discursive properties and possibilities of a small-scale instances of informal deliberation to contribute to discursive participation could be strengthened and utilized by the local communities. Based on the experiences of our project, communities and practitioners should first identify naturally formed arenas of participation, where individuals develop and express their opinions and form shared views on communal issues. I have only considered the potential of strengthening the discursive participation of elderly people within a specific function and in a distinct local setting in this paper. Arguably, other local civil society forums – such as parent’s associations, sport clubs, and village associations and resident associations – encourage discursive participation when they likewise share relevant information with participants, facilitate accessible discussion, foster a wide range of interests, and have their deliberative potential acknowledged. The second question for communities and practitioners to address would be how

information from these informal communicative forums is mediated into formal deliberative processes. In our case study the municipality established co-operative networks for communication and information sharing. Local authorities personally visit Elderly People's Meetings to share information and to discuss with the participants, or they organize opinion polls to learn about the needs and opinions of the participants. The municipality also supports this forum by providing the space for the meetings. In support of ongoing flow of information, the municipality provides the professional contribution of the municipality's geriatrician.

Working together with civil society forums in supporting self-motivated participation and accessible discussions, communities and practitioners can enhance residents' inspiration and motivation to participate as well as develop ongoing opportunities for citizens to exert influence. This could compliment detached moments of formal deliberation and help in addressing the challenges of finding cost-effective, and representative local participatory practices. Based on our experience embedded networks with informal civil society forums reduce time and resources needed to reach participants compared to organized formal deliberative events. When motivation to participate in civil society forums is based on concrete issues aiming to improve everyday lives of the participants, engagement in self-organized forums is easier to generate than in formal deliberations with abstract public topics. To conclude, adopting a complimentary approach for formal deliberative practices, local communities and practitioners could do well in building a truly deliberative community and sustainable participation; instead of gathering a sample of people to deliberate on demand, reach out to existing forums initiated by residents themselves.

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