Struggles over Expertise
Practices of Politicization and Depoliticization in Participatory Democracy

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Abstract: There is growing concern among democracy scholars that participatory innovations pose a depoliticizing threat to democracy. This article tackles this concern by providing a more nuanced understanding of how politicization and depoliticization take shape in participatory initiatives. Based on ethnographic research on participatory projects with marginalized people who are invited to act as experiential experts, the article examines how actors limit and open up possibilities to participate. By focusing on struggles concerning the definition of expertise, the article identifies a threefold character of politicization as a practice within participatory innovations. It involves (1) illuminating the boundaries that define the actors' possibilities; (2) making a connection between these boundaries and specific value bases; and (3) imagining an alternative normative basis for participation.

Keywords: citizen participation, depoliticization, experiential expertise, participatory democracy, politicization, public policy

Amid the continuing expansion of experiments in participatory governance, there is growing criticism among democracy scholars of the effects that such innovations have for democracy (for an overview, see Bherer et al. 2016). Prior research has pointed out how participatory innovations often fail to engage the least well-off and to ensure inclusion and diversity, subsequently amplifying the voices that are already heard in a society (Ryfe and Stalsburg 2012; Walker et al. 2015). Moreover, the innovations' "governance-driven" (Warren 2009) nature has been critiqued for the limited space of participation it offers for citizens, also suggesting that the objectives of such innovations lie more in legitimizing decisions and policy processes and less in empowering citizens (Cornwall and Coelho 2007; Eliasoph 2011).

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One potent line of criticism has focused on the "depoliticizing tendency" of participatory projects (e.g., Griggs et al. 2014; Swyngedouw 2005). These critical investigations place a key emphasis on politicization as a necessary component of democracy. They contend that the often deliberation- and collaboration-oriented participatory processes may be geared to tame rather than celebrate conflict, exclude "unfit" participants, and work to sustain rather than destabilize existing political institutions and elites (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2017; Dean 2018). As such, participatory processes have been labeled "postdemocratic" (Swyngedouw 2005), diluting, rather than enforcing, the original, radical, and egalitarian ethos of the participatory democratic project (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2014; Walker et al. 2015).

From this perspective, projects that call upon citizens to participate as *lay or experience-based experts* have been the focus of particular concern. Prior research has pointed out how framing participation as an expert contribution can have a depoliticizing effect (Liberatore and Funtowicz 2003; Martin 2008). By presenting problems as technical concerns, employing expert vocabulary, and valuing knowledge over opinions and values, public participation can be framed as taking place in the "neutral, apolitical" administrative sphere (Li 2007; Straßheim 2015), making critical voices and strong personal attachments and agendas appear as unfitting (for an expert) (Barnes 2008; Beresford 2002). When evaluating democracy for its possibilities to offer spaces of politicization, these practices of lay expertise have been suggested to sediment rather than enable the questioning of existing knowledge claims and power structures, making their value for democracy uncertain at best.

This article contributes to the evaluative discussion of participatory practices by developing politicization toward a more empirically applicable concept of evaluation. It departs from the proposition that if depoliticization is the major antidemocratic concern to be tackled within expert-focused participatory projects, we need to develop our empirical understanding of what politicization looks like (Dean 2018; Lowndes and Paxton 2018), before we are able to evaluate whether and how well the projects investigated "succeed" as democratic spaces. Subsequently, the article sets out to unpack *how politicization and depoliticization take shape* within participatory innovations.

This understanding requires two moves that inform one another: on the one hand, we need to dissect conceptually what exactly takes place when politicization and depoliticization happen. On the other, we need meticulous empirical accounts on how politicization and depoliticization are pursued by actors in real-life situations. Through their more detailed understanding as everyday practices, we are better equipped to grasp the

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fleeting characteristic of "the political" that many democratic scholars have tended to conceptualize as something extraordinary and rare (e.g., Rancière 1999), and to envision institutions that foster politicization and the critical capacities of actors also within participatory initiatives.

I explore how depoliticization takes shape and how, in turn, politicization is attempted through an empirical analysis of participatory projects in the context of Finnish social policy. These projects engage marginalized citizens as *experts-by-experience* in social welfare institutions in order to achieve an inclusive, efficient, and empowering governance process. In my analysis, I probe the allusion of the depoliticizing effects of expert participation by examining how the notion of expertise is assembled in these participatory schemes, and how its definitions and redefinitions become a key site of struggle through which the lay experts' possibilities for participation are constructed and fought for. Throughout, I assume an abductive approach where my observations are preinformed by an understanding of politicization as rendering something "playable" (Palonen 2013), but where I aim at enriching this conceptualization via empirical analysis.

The article starts with an overview of earlier literature on the concepts of politicization and depoliticization, and a discussion on how they have thus far been employed as analytical tools in the context of participation studies. In my analysis, I illustrate how the notion of expertise was formulated as a self-evident "fact" in the projects analyzed, and how this definition both limited the lay experts' possibilities for participation and made it particularly demanding to contest these boundaries. I further explore what practices the participants and practitioners used to contest the boundaries of "acceptable participation" and "reliable expertise" in the projects' context. Based on this analysis, I propose three practices that contribute to the politicization of experience-based expertise: (1) illuminating the boundaries that currently define the actors' possibilities; (2) making a connection between these boundaries and specific moral principles or political projects; and (3) rendering the status quo "playable" by imagining an alternative normative basis for participation.

Politicization in Participatory Projects

The evaluation and critique of participatory measures has an equally long history as the concentrated efforts to increase citizen participation (see Arnstein 1969). However, as is evident from the myriad of different evaluative schemes on offer, the criteria with which "the success" of participatory measures can be deemed is far from self-evident (Norval 2014;

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for an overview, see Dean 2017). Participatory measures can be labeled an asset for democracy if they succeed in "empowering" their participants (Meriluoto 2018; Eliasoph 2011), in including hitherto sidelined people and voices in political debates (Cotterell and Morris 2011), in gaining lay knowledge in efforts of "knowledge-based decision-making" (Smith-Merry 2012), or in increasing mutual understanding among citizens and fostering a consensus-oriented dialogue between them (Bächtiger et al. 2018).

What most of these evaluative criteria have in common is an undergirding, and yet often somewhat unspelled (O'Flynn 2019), notion of "giving or sharing power" to or with the participants. As markers of this power-sharing, scholars have investigated whether the initiatives' selection of participants is inclusive and open, whether dialogue between them is equal, and whether they have the authority to make decisions with actual effect (Baiocchi et al. 2011; Curato and Böker 2016; Fung 2006; Smith 2009). However, one key aspect in the initiatives' contribution to democracy is often sidelined in empirical evaluations: participants' ability to affect the conditions under which they participate (see Fung 2015; and Ganuza et al. 2016). I argue that we need better analytical tools to inquire into how the participants' possibilities to act in the initiatives are limited and, in turn, broadened. For this purpose, I propose bringing in the concepts of politicization and depoliticization as analytical devices.

While the concepts of politicization and depoliticization are theoretically appealing, they have so far had rather limited empirical applicability. This is largely due to the abstract nature of the concepts' definitions (e.g., Mouffe 2013; for a synthesis, see Howarth 2008). In her recent meta-level reading on different theoretical approaches to politicization, Tania Murray Li (2019) characterizes the term as a critique of the present configuration of power. Politicization, in its different actualizations, means rendering "playable" (Palonen 2013) something that has previously appeared or been presented as self-evident or necessary. By and large, politicization is envisioned as "disruption," "critique," or "resistance" that enables making previously "self-evident" or "necessary" states of things contingent and up for reformulation (Foucault 1982; Li 2019; Paxton 2019; Wingenbach 2011). This can take form, for example, in redefinitions of concepts and meanings that steer people's possibilities to take part (for an example, see Li 2007). In turn, the practices that define and attempt to portray these definitions as self-evident are pitted as depoliticizing, as they attempt to settle possible ways of being for individuals (Foucault and Pearson 1983; Li 2019).

What makes these interruptions politicizing is the connection made to principles of justice that come from outside the immediate question at

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hand (Fraser 2001; Luhtakallio et al. 2019). The mere act of showing something *could* be otherwise does not yet politicize the matter. In addition, normative connection needs to be made to show that things also *should* be otherwise, that the present state of things violates certain normative principles that the actors consider primary.

In order for this broad notion of critique and disruption to have sway as an analytical tool, we need more accounts that operationalize the concept empirically. While practical examples of *depoliticization*—ranging from "rendering technical" (Li 2007; Miller and Rose 2008), "suppressing conflict" (especially Mouffe 2000), to individualizing or furthermore "privatizing" collective issues and problems (Fraser 1997; Wood and Flinders 2014)—are to be found also in earlier literature on participatory initiatives (e.g., Li 2007; Martin 2012; Walker et al. 2015), empirical research on practices of politicization within participatory processes, or of local struggles between attempts of de- and re-politicization are far less frequent (see, however, Carrel 2015; Larner 2014; and Luhtakallio 2012).

In my analysis, I follow and seek to detail the above-defined characteristic of politicization: I conceptualize politicization as a set of practices that render a previously self-evident or necessary-appearing matter contingent and that connect this contestation to more abstract, normative principles. Depoliticization, in turn, takes place through practices of closure and detachment from any normative debate: by claiming an issue as a technical, fact-based administrative issue to be discussed "behind closed doors" by relevant experts (Li 2007; Sullivan 2014). In the following, I ask how these practices of depoliticization and repoliticization emerge in the everyday of participatory initiatives that activate marginalized citizens as experts. My particular focus is in the projects' central notion of expertise: as the participants are constructed as "experts of themselves," varying definitions of expertise become key sites of struggle that determine their possibilities to participate.

Context, Data, and Methods

The empirical case of this article is a relatively novel but very widely adopted participatory innovation in Finland entitled "expertise-by-experience." The concept was first introduced in the Finnish context in the early 2000s by mental health organizations as a means to engage the organizations' beneficiaries. After a significant increase in public funding for such participatory innovations, it was then disseminated widely to the social welfare and health sectors, and to both public sector and civil society organizations (CSOs), especially in the 2010s (Meriluoto 2018).

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The projects developing the practice were all initiated by public administration or by CSOs as a policy response to the largely government-initiated demands for "more participatory approaches" within social policy and public governance. They reflect a broader paradigm shift in Finnish governance norms that were launched in the beginning of the 2000s as the government's response to the so-called "democracy deficit" in Finnish society, pushing toward new innovations to involve and activate citizens (Matthies and Uggerhøj 2014). This is noteworthy and somewhat unique when compared, for example, to the bottom-up initiatives of survivor movements in the United Kingdom (Noorani 2013): it was not the citizens who initiated demands to have their voices heard, but the government and civil society institutions that sought new measures to involve and engage citizens.

Expertise-by-experience was, and continues to be, developed in projects. This is largely due to funding structures within the Finnish health and social welfare sectors, leaving expertise-by-experience along with other participatory innovations as somewhat isolated "development projects" with good intentions but temporary funding, weak institutional ties, and subsequently little permanent impact (Kuokkanen 2016). While there is an abundance of goodwilled rhetoric in official public strategies to include experts-by-experience in all stages and levels of decision-making, and a long history of consultation-based administrative models, there are very few institutional arrangements to ensure the inclusion of experts-by-experience. Any connections to decision-making bodies hang at the mercy of key personnel's motivation to make room for them, leading to their involvement being sporadic and individualizing.

The following analysis draws on two sets of empirical data. The first consists of themed interviews with 23 experts-by-experience and 14 professionals, and a group discussion among five experts-by-experience,[1] which were conducted in seven publicly funded projects developing expertise-by-experience in the Finnish social welfare sector between 2010 and 2015. This interview data is complemented by policy documents on expertise-by-experience produced by the projects as well as their funders during the corresponding time period, and my own ethnographic observations as a practitioner in one of the CSOs studied[2] during 2011–2014.

The second set of data consists of ethnographic fieldnotes and interview data from 2018–2020 from two ongoing CSO-led projects whose objective was to offer alternative avenues for societal influence for people with traumatic life experiences. These project participants are customarily referred to as experts-by-experience by outsiders, and the projects selectively use the term, especially when communicating with their funder or institutional collaborators. However, the project members hold a very

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reserved relationship with the notion and regularly exclaim how they have chosen *not* to adopt the term into the project vocabulary. These two datasets offer a chance to follow how the new term was interpreted, debated, and employed in social welfare organizations over a 10-year period, and how its use during that time grew increasingly controversial.

All of the experts-by-experience interviewed had undergone a difficult life experience, such as substance abuse, mental illness, homelessness, or domestic violence in their past. They had been invited to act in the organizations studied as experts based on those experiences. In practice, their tasks varied widely. Some participated in service coproduction, others were invited as consultants in projects' steering committees, or expert boards in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. Most also carried out peer-support tasks and delivered lectures on their experiences to political decision-makers, public officials, local service providers, or future professionals. Irrespective of the task, the main contributions expected from the experts-by-experience were "their story"—a form of speaking that many trained for—and the resulting experiential knowledge that was most often conceived as a very concrete kind; where to place the electronic outlets in a service home or how to communicate the social workers' phone numbers to new clients.

The interviewed experts-by-experience were volunteers, paid professionals, or "semiprofessionals," who were compensated for their occasional participation. The interviewed professionals all worked in projects tasked with developing expertise-by-experience in their respective organizations. Their positions ranged from project employee to executive director, but they all had hands-on tasks with the role of expert-by-experience as part of their work.

During the collection of the first set of data, the concept was markedly in flux; it had rapidly increased in popularity but there was a widely shared sense of confusion among my informants about its content. This makes the interview data and the documents from the corresponding time period particularly fruitful data with which to study politicization and depoliticization in negotiations about the definitions of expertise and the right to take part as an expert. The second dataset offers an intriguing perspective from five years later; after the practice had been adopted and developed extensively, its use has also come to be interpreted as a commitment to certain values and ways of working. The more intense the concept's perceived ties to certain, particular objectives and commitments, the more explicitly it was also critiqued and contested.

In my analysis, I focused on the instances where the informants or the policymakers (through documents) attempted to "settle" the meaning of experience-based expertise and make it appear incontestable. In

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turn, I also pinpointed the occurrences where the informants explicitly described going against what they conceived of as the dominant understanding of expertise. Further, I investigated how they connected the definition, or inversely detached it from specific values. I illustrate how, through these acts, the concept is used to close down and open up possibilities to participate for my informants inhabiting marginalized positions in Finnish society.

Analysis: Politicization and Depoliticization as Practices

Depoliticizing Expertise

My ethnographic notes from fall 2013 come from the context of a social welfare CSO that was established and run by activists in the 1940s but had since morphed into a highly specialized expert organization "helping and nurturing customers." In fall 2013, the idea of experts-by-experience was introduced to the CSO by a few practitioners, myself included, working in a project tasked with developing "more participatory and inclusive measures" for the organization. We started developing the idea by inviting a group of (the now-called) experts-by-experience to put the idea into practice with us. The group—12 former beneficiaries who had expressed interest in the idea—met over three weekends and came up with rather modest ideas: that people's experiential knowledge would be recognized in customer contacts and that experiential experts might take charge of organizing some peer-support activities. Their most ambitious ideas, which they deemed were only achievable on rare occasions, had to do with institutional arrangements, such as joint meetings with practitioners and experts-by-experience that would allow all parties to develop the organization's work together.

While some of my colleagues were immediately enthusiastic about the group's ideas, many expressed reservations toward them. It was especially people working in direct contact with customers who expressed a strong urge to contain and limit either the issues the experts-by-experience would be allowed to discuss, or the scope of who should be allowed to act as an expert-by-experience. When I discussed the idea with a colleague from our local branch, they acclaimed in slight horror: "But [if we were to listen to everyone] then there's no telling what kind of ideas they might have!"

The quote summarizes several fears that my colleagues held: they had doubts about the participants' ability to produce "reasonable" ideas, and, perhaps most pressingly, were worried that everyone's ideas could now be treated the same, stripping the practitioners of their authority. This latter point was later made explicit by a particularly disgruntled

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colleague, who exclaimed during a meeting how "apparently anyone can do my job these days!" For many expert practitioners, the potential outcomes of participation appeared scary, and the response was to set up standards, guidelines, and recommendations that made the "wild and uncontrollable" participation manageable. "Developing civic participation," quite concretely, meant writing up recommendations, definitions, and even rules in the form of a guidebook.

A similar need to define was apparent also at the national level. The National Institute for Health and Welfare hired a consultant to carry out seven workshops across Finland in late 2013 and early 2014. Their task was "to map the concept of expertise-by-experience, the expectations towards it, issues that need to be developed, as well as to gather local working methods and other emerging themes."[3] The "problems" identified in the workshops were "the ambiguity of the concept," "the need to uniform the trainings for experts-by-experience," "the lack of manuals on expertise-by-experience," "the lack of rules concerning the experts'-by-experience role and pay," and "the lack of a coordinating body." The underlying problem, then, seemed to be the ungovernability of and "the jungle of interpretations and ways of doing" expertise-by-experience.

The responses in the policy document produced, in turn, all had to do with taking control. They emphasized the "need to define" expertise-by-experience, and recommended two manuals to be written on the topic to craft common meanings and lay down ground rules. The objective, as the report outlined, was "to put an end to the years of twirling with the concept in the field, and to develop the practice into a sensible and manageable system."

Most individual projects, then, took the institute's urge to define at face value. The projects often did not consider themselves as having an active role in defining expertise-by-experience, but rather explained how certain requirements inevitably follow from the now-constructed expert position: key characteristics of expertise were most often presented as self-evident facts, from which a certain kind of participant role will inevitably follow. This allowed the social welfare professionals to retain control over who and how actually got to participate. Expertise was thought of – and presented – as having self-evident, uncontestable criteria that the participants now needed to meet if they wished to participate *as experts,* limiting their possibilities to participate as well as the possibilities to contest these boundaries.

Most often, these characteristics of expertise – which translated into requirements for participation – included "having a distance to one's experiences." Its marker was above all the ability to speak about one's experiences "neutrally, from a distance" – to contribute reliable information

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instead of personal emotions or opinions as the following two practitioners explain (see also Martin 2009):

> Practitioner 1: Experts-by-experience don't act in a therapeutic environment and the listeners don't need to receive any emotional outbursts but the *facts as they are*.
> Practitioner 2: Yeah, for example when talking about service development, if you have very bitter experiences, it's very good if you have been able to form them into constructive criticism. Then you don't cause any resistance in the professional's part. (Two practitioners, 27 April 2015)

The organization where the informants worked set up a lengthy training course for the experts-by-experience in which they practiced sharing their story "as an expert." The organization then "relayed" these trained experts-by-experience to events and organizations—usually trainings for professionals or policy advisory groups—that "ordered" them. When an order arrived, the practitioners would consider who would be "the best fit" and "ready" for the particular task. As the transcript above illustrates, the mastery of one's expert role was defined as the ability and willingness to provide *facts as they are*. As experts are casted as unarguably neutral, collaborative, and fact-oriented, their environment of participation is also constructed as fact-based collaboration toward mutual goals, not as a debate between different interests and opinions.

For the practitioners, this neutral and objective expert figure was not threatening, but instead familiar and furthermore containable. By equating "knowing oneself" with the ability to talk in a neutral and objective manner, the projects' practitioners retained control over deciding who and what kinds of input would be accepted and recognized, and preserved the ability to legitimately exclude unwanted and awkward input. The "apolitical" expert definition proved an apt tool for requiring certain kinds of behavior from the participants while allowing them to conceal their use of power in making such boundaries.

For the experts-by-experience, this "objective" definition of expertise meant a measuring stick against which their capability to participate was evaluated. The self-evident-appearing definition of expertise was used as a tool to draw a line between those who were "ready" to assume the role of a participant and those who were "still recovering" and subsequently not quite fit for participation. Furthermore, it was nigh impossible to contest, as the definition of expertise was presented as a given fact.

It is crucial to note that it was not only the practitioners and policymakers seeking to control expertise in this context. In some cases, it was even more strongly the experts-by-experience who wanted to place strict boundaries on ways of being an expert-by-experience. The expert position

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was experienced as a special status that was accomplished by acquiring "additional knowledge" that "mere peer supporters" did not have. The strict requirements, and the accomplishment of achieving them, offered some experts-by-experience a chance for an empowering experience. These experiences, however, necessitated that the definition of expertise was understood as an apolitical, undisputable fact that could thus provide an objective measuring stick for their growing status. If expertise could mean many things, and anyone could be an expert in their own way, their efforts and the special status achieved through them would be rendered meaningless.

This technocratically fixed definition of expertise presents equality of participation as their *goal,* which is attainable by "lifting" the experts-by-experience competences to the "same level" as that of the professionals. This definition, however empowering it may be in intention, can nonetheless be problematic for the democratic project, as it sustains hierarchy and makes its critique difficult. This logic gets reversed in the politicizing interruptions explored next. They also tap into equality but use it as their premise in demanding a radical redefinition of expertise.

Politicizing Expertise

Not all my informants approached the concept of expertise as a self-evident notion. In 2014–2015, some approached it as a concept that – as a result of the very coining of the idea of experiential expertise – could now be legitimately challenged and redefined. In the data from 2018–2020, this approach to the concept has only intensified: expertise is now clearly conceived of as contingent term, and it is purposefully used to broaden the limits of participation. In what follows, I suggest three practices that contribute to the concept's politicization:

1. illuminating how the concept currently creates boundaries for the actors' possibilities to participate;
2. making a connection between these boundaries and specific moral principles or political projects – either by showing how the current definition violates the moral principles the actor holds primary, or by exposing the hitherto implicit values that are drawn upon when justifying the status quo; and
3. rendering the status quo "playable" by imagining an alternative normative connection – in this case, proposing alternative possible ways to justify participation in the projects' context.

As we will see, these three practices of politicization are not always simultaneously attempted or possible, and they are not necessarily temporarily aligned. However, when performed by multiple actors on various

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occasions and situations they contribute to what we understand as politicization – an interruption to the normal order of things and a shared sense that things should be otherwise.

In 2014–2015, roughly half of my informants were openly critical of the way the concept of expertise was put to use in the projects. Many explicitly stated "hating" or "despising" the term. One particularly disillusioned expert-by-experience acclaimed how "The mental health people have hugged the concept and now it's ruined." The "mental health peoples'" definition, critiqued by many others too, was the one that strongly emphasized the need to have a distance from one's experiences in order to become an expert. It was "ruined" because it was conceived of as having predefined criteria for experts-by-experience – a form in to which the participants needed to fit themselves – whereas many experts-by-experience would have instead wanted to be the ones crafting the ways in which expertise in this context was defined.

This position was echoed much more sternly by my informants from 2018–2020. One participatory project veteran, who had witnessed experts-by-experience being invited to countless seminars, expert boards, and training events explained the problem as follows:

> I've experienced so many projects and witnessed how they include and activate people. They're so narrow and predetermined that it borderlines abuse … When it comes to experts-by-experience, they [the organizers of an event] give you 30 minutes and a list of topics beforehand. And they top it off by advising how you should rather speak from this or that point of view. "If you speak about yourself, use 15 minutes for it, but do speak about the service system for the next 15. Remember to thank everyone and include positive examples." It is a ready package that they order. (Practitioner, 10 December 2018)

These outspoken boundaries – possibilities too narrow to allow participation, stemming from a predetermined notion of expertise and the inequality in defining the concept – are the point of departure for politicization. My informants regularly explained how they were uncomfortable with using the term for its unwanted connotations and limits to participation, and many openly wondered who actually "owned" the term and had the right to define it.

As their response, many of my informants started to deliberately act "against" the concept's current definition in order to illuminate the expectations it carried for their participation. For example, some experts-by-experience knowingly introduced strongly emotion-filled rhetoric in contexts where this was not deemed appropriate for an expert. Similarly, some explained how it was important for them to curse every now and then, just to

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remind everyone of their unique position as *a different kind* of expert. Many also explicitly opposed, and refused to participate in, the trainings organized for experts-by-experience, contending that in this context expertise was not something you could "learn from school" and that the premises behind such a formulation of expertise in this context were entirely off.

These acts of everyday resistance started by illuminating the present boundaries of the concept and rendering them playable by ridiculing or explicitly refusing them. However, these forms of resistance can only be thought of as acts of politicization when they add a normative dimension; things are not only ridiculous but also wrong and unjust (Fraser 2001). The project actors did this concretely by either explaining how the present definition contradicted the principle of equality, or by illustrating how it was tied to an entirely different value base, which had hitherto been left implicit.

In the following interview quote, a practitioner from 2015 pits the concept's use as suppressive. This opinion was somewhat shared in the practitioner's organization: while the experts'-by-experience participation was significant in developing the organization's own work, the experts-by-experience who had been invited to national decision-making bodies had quite tokenistic experiences from them. They felt that they were there for mere appearances, and that they needed to wrap their story in a particular way:

> Truth be told, it bugs me that we need to call these people experts-by-experience in order for them to be heard. Maybe it tells a little something about our system and the lack of participatory democracy, which isn't quite up there where it should be. I think it's a sign of how inclusion in our society is still limited. You need to prove you're something before you can be heard. (Practitioner, 16 October 2015)

Similarly, the following expert-by-experience explains how they understood "the need to define" as the practitioners' and especially the policymakers' need to take control over who the experts-by-experience were, and what they were allowed to do. They had experiences of taking part in some local decision-making bodies, and even one national expert steering group, but felt that they were mainly present because of the participatory trend. Expertise-by-experience, in their view, was a way for social welfare officials to comfortably include a few people of their choosing:

> Q: Why do you think we have started using this concept [of expert-by-experience]?
> Expert-by-experience: I think it comes more from the professionals' part. They want a title or a sign that you're not just anyone when you

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> walk into an office. The title signals that you come from somewhere and are, somehow, an employee after all. So by the title you're also given the right to access these environments. I think it's a safety measure from the part of the professionals, so that not just anyone can walk into a ministry. You need the title to show that you have a legitimate reason to be there. (Expert-by-experience, 14 May 2014)

The two informants quoted above both suspect that the actual purpose of the term was to serve as "a proof or "a safety measure for the professionals" – that is, a way to make sure that only certain kinds of participants are heard and pass through the Ministry's doors. By pointing to the administration's prerogative in defining expertise, they also point to the structural injustice in the possibilities to define the term and to how it contradicts the principle of equality, which they consider primary. Instead, they insist on the primacy of the experts'-by-experience own definition of who should be acknowledged as an expert in this context (see Flinders and Wood 2018). While they acknowledge the value of having the right to take part in decision-making, they argue that people should have this right without having to prove anything and play the part of a neutral, collaborative expert. Arguments of this kind shift the level of discussion to reveal the undergirding values that affect the way expertise-by-experience is currently being assembled.

Some informants moved their critique further to explicitly connect the concept's current definition to a political project that they perceived to be undergirding the concept's use. The following discussion with an expert-by-experience illustrates how they make a connection between expertise-by-experience and a neoliberal rationale of governing:

> Q: Why do you think expertise-by-experience is so popular all of a sudden?
> Expert-by-experience: I think it is largely the result of our economic situation and the broader changes in our society. I mean all the cuts in public services … The basic underlying idea is that nothing should cost anything.
> Q: How do you think that these participatory projects are connected to this?
> Expert-by-experience: Participation is very cheap. Inclusion is very cheap. Expertise-by-experience is extremely cheap because it enables the municipalities to free resources for other tasks. Now the emphasis is on making people [able] to participate in their own well-being. Expertise-by-experience shifts the responsibility to people themselves. (Expert-by-experience, 10 June 2014)

The above expert-by-experience explicitly connects this type of participation to the political objective of cutting public expenses and inciting

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people to assume more responsibility for their individual well-being. Making these types of connections is the most explicit form of politicization: it makes an immediate connection between the current assemblage of expertise and a specific political project – in this case, the neoliberal ideal of responsible, self-sustaining citizens. This simultaneously achieves the three components of politicization: it illustrates the concept's violation of a normative principle, exposes its undergirding assumptions and values, and, by labeling them as a specific political project, manages to show that this is but one possible way to conceive of expertise in this context.

In my data from 2018–2020, the contingency of the concept had become a widely shared perception and the term had lost its status as a self-evident fact. Instead, the concept was now seen to entail a clear commitment to values of collaboration and aspiration to objectivity. Now, it was widely understood as "the public sector's tool to turn these people into professionals," as one project practitioner explained in 2020.

The spelling out of the concept's narrow definition and the objectives behind its use amplified the critiquing of it. Many of my informants opted to abandon the "limiting and moldy term," while many also chose to make use of the concept to advance their own objectives. As one informant explained: "Concepts have a lot of power. We'll use the concept in contexts where they buy that bullshit, where it opens doors and where it's the only concept that the opposite side understands." After the concept's normative ties had been made explicit, its critique as well as its strategic use had also become more feasible.

Conclusion: How to Evaluate Politicization?

In this article, I have illustrated how politicization and depoliticization take shape within participatory projects. I have shown how the notion of expertise is taken up as a tool to delineate participants' possibilities to act in participatory projects inviting experts-by-experience into the Finnish social policy process. The participants are managed by fixing the meaning of expertise through manuals and trainings to refer to technocratic knowledge and neutral and collaborative behavior, and by making this definition appear as a self-evident given. I argue that this depoliticizes the term, and significantly limits participants' possibilities to act as well as to contest the boundaries of participation.

The politicizing practices I have identified did not seek to rid participatory processes of expertise. Instead, they attempted to *politicize expertise* – to contest what expertise should mean in this context, who should consequently be allowed to act as such, and participate in the concept's

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redefinitions. Based on my analysis, I have suggested three practices that contribute to the concept's politicization: (1) illuminating the boundaries that currently define the actors' possibilities; (2) making a connection between these boundaries and specific moral principles or political projects – either by showing how the current definition violates the moral principles the actor holds primary, or by exposing the hitherto implicit values that are drawn upon when justifying the status quo; and (3) rendering the status quo "playable" by imagining an alternative normative connection. Politicization, then, consists of practices that "render playable" and show how things *could* be otherwise, and practices that make a normative connection asserting why things *should* be otherwise.

Intriguingly, both the actors that strived to politicize and those who sought to depoliticize the concept of expertise founded their claims on the principle of equality. The "apolitical," fixed definition of expertise was presented as a means of empowerment by offering the participants experiences of having been "lifted" to the same level of expertise as the professionals. The disruptive redefinitions, in turn, start from a premise of equality, and use it to claim recognition for a novel interpretation of expertise. This finding speaks to our understanding of the participatory projects' empowering potential; it suggests two quite distinct routes of empowerment where one is built on the idea of climbing a hierarchical ladder and the other is built on the premise of recognizing the equal value of everyone's experiences. This underlying difference in how equality is understood may be a fruitful distinction in the future analysis of empowerment initiatives.

Finally, as the article's main ambition has been to develop the concept of politicization into an analytical tool in evaluating participatory projects; some evaluation of the projects' democratic quality with the developed tool is called for. Were the attempts to politicize successful? Moreover, what is successful politicization from the point of view of democracy? Is it a success, if the experts-by-experience manage to illuminate how unjust the current boundaries are, but are shut down from participating while showing this? In turn, are they unsuccessful if they conform to the predefined role but manage to achieve meaningful policy changes? I argue that the value of the developed analytical tool lays precisely in discerning between these two levels of success: the everyday politics and the political. A distinction between these two domains shows that it may be possible to have "political wins" in terms of policy change without challenging anything at the level of the assumptions and rationales that shape our imaginaries and define what is possible. However, imagining altogether new possibilities, setting entirely new agendas or affecting the conditions of participation requires pushing for changes at the level of the political.

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As an example, the article has shown how successes at the level of politicization require fine-tuned capabilities from the participants. First, one must be able to identify the processes and "language games" through which one's possibilities for participation are being steered. Second, one must be quite skilled in criticizing them just enough to "cause a stir," as one expert-by-experience put it, but not too much, so as to not give others the tools to "legitimately" discard one's critique as "the utterances of an unstable mind." Thus, the possibilities for politicization are in no way equal, framing the democratic dilemma of participatory projects, and its evaluative research agenda in a new way. When evaluated with the analytical tool of politicization, one root cause for deepening democratic inequalities in participatory arrangements seems to stem from the lack of equal resources to contest the initiatives' rationales.

Subsequently, a more empirically grounded understanding of politicization adds an important evaluative dimension to our toolkit when we assess if and how a participatory project has contributed to democracy. It urges us to demand more from participatory projects that can also be — and increasingly are — used to advance undemocratic purposes (Keane 2020). A practice-oriented focus on politicization steers our analytical attention to how meanings are fixed to make issues appear as "self-evident" and to whether and how they can be contested and critiqued. Fostering democratic practices might not (only) require institutional rearrangements, but also shifts in our analytical focus so that we also recognize the democratic value of the everyday and micro-scale normative struggles over meanings as key moments of politicization.

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NOTES

1. The group discussion was organized on 30 November 2016. I designed the outline for the discussion, but was not present at the event in order to make the participants feel at ease to discuss and criticize my initial findings. The discussion was led by one of the experts-by-experience I had previously interviewed, to whom I extend my deepest gratitude.
2. To ensure anonymity, I have chosen not to name the CSO I was employed at.
3. Kokemusasiantuntijuus – totta vai tarua? Kooste kokemusasiantuntijuus työpajoista 12/2013–3/2014 [Expertise-by-experience, true or false? An overview of the workshops on expertise-by-experience 12/2013–3/2014].

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