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On youth participation and adult manipulation: Exploring the lowest rung of Hart's ladder in a youth organization

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Abstract
The study explored the intersection of youth participation in collective decision-making and adult manipulation. To explore this intersection, we use a case study of youth participation in a conflict regarding one youth organization splitting off from another. The findings showed that the manipulated participation had social, cognitive, and discursive facets. These multiple facets resulted in intense youth engagement in the conflict, which may blur the boundary between high-level participation and manipulation. The intersection of participation and manipulation is particularly relevant to youth organizations with strong participation ethos, which paradoxically may be fertile ground for the emergence of manipulated participation.

Introduction

"It was so sad… We suddenly understood that [our youth organization] was likely to be dismantled… and we didn't know how to process it… These were really difficult days… so we prepared for the vote like we never prepared for anything else in our lives." (Abigail, age 18)

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Many youth-led organizations have a holistic ethos of youth participation in organizational decision-making. This ethos is generally manifested in the organizations' formal goals and routine practices, typically promoting a relatively high level of youth participation (Rosen, 2019; Taft and Gordon, 2013). The result is often power-sharing between the youth and adults, contributing to the youth's identity and leadership skills (see Martínez et al., 2017). The current study shows that this holistic ethos of participation can also be manipulated to advance adults' interests. To explore this phenomenon, we use a case study of youth participation in a conflict regarding one youth organization (hereinafter, O1) splitting off from another (hereinafter, O2). Many of O1's youth were deeply engaged in the conflict, investing considerable time and effort in persuading adult decision-makers to grant O1 the status of an independent youth organization, despite its not meeting state funding requirements. Then, each O1 branch needed to decide whether to continue its youth activities under the organizational umbrella of O2 or affiliate with a third organization (hereinafter, O3).

The cited quote by Abigail captures some of the main themes that emerged from our study. One theme concerned the youth's deep emotional engagement in the struggle over their youth organization's future, the resources they invested in this struggle, and their exceptional commitment. Another subtler theme concerned the youth's lack of complete information and their late revelation that the adults managed the conflict behind their backs. We term the intersection of these themes "manipulated participation." Within this intersection, a thin and sometimes elusive boundary separates high youth participation levels in decision-making from manipulation.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The literature review is presented in three parts. The first part discusses children's participation rights, anchored in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989; hereinafter, UNCRC). The second part focuses on Hart's (1992) Ladder of Children's Participation, which conceptualized manipulation as the lowest rung of practices that may appear as participation but should not be considered as such. No study to date has developed Hart's definition of manipulation. The third part of the literature review focuses on studies that help to conceptualize the intersection of participation and manipulation and distinguish between manipulation and other close concepts, such as indoctrination and coercion. The next section presents the research design based on interviews conducted with youth and adults involved in a conflict regarding a youth organization. The Findings section analyzes the case according to the triangulated approach to manipulation as a form of social power abuse, cognitive mind control, and discursive interaction (Van Dijk, 2006). The final section presents our conclusions.

Literature review

Children's and youth's participation rights

Children's rights to participate in decision-making on issues that concern them have a cross-cutting role in implementing the entire UNCRC (Hanson and Lundy, 2017; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). They apply to decisions concerning

individual children, such as determining custody after divorce or placing a child in special education, and decisions having collective implications made by a group of children (see UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). This study addresses youth participation in collective decision-making. Frameworks for youth participation in collective decision-making operate in schools (e.g. Cross et al., 2021; Wyness, 2009), youth organizations (e.g. Conner, 2016; Rosen, 2019), municipalities (e.g. Faulkner, 2009; Gazit and Perry-Hazan, 2020; Nir and Perry-Hazan, 2016), communities (e.g. Campbell et al., 2009; Rimmer, 2012) and national institutions (e.g. Perry-Hazan, 2016; Shephard and Patrikios, 2013). Collective participation rights in the UNCRC are intertwined with other models having multiple foci: student voice (e.g. Fielding, 2004; Mitra, 2018), youth activism (e.g. Carey et al., 2021; Conner and Rosen, 2016), youth organizing (e.g. Conner and Zaino, 2013; Ortega-Williams, 2020) and youth-adult partnerships (e.g. Mitra, 2009; Zeldin et al., 2016).

Various studies have addressed specific dimensions of children's participation, particularly its level (e.g. Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001), whereas others conceptualized the normative elements that should comprise participation rights (Lundy, 2007) or offered a framework for analyzing children's participation (e.g. Gal, 2017; Perry-Hazan and Somech, 2021). Another thread in the literature has suggested various challenges to how participatory practices are implemented. These challenges have typically cited adultism, namely adults' biases regarding the low value of children's opinions (e.g. Checkoway, 2011; Perry-Hazan, 2016; Shier et al., 2014); the interconnections of participatory activities and neoliberal discourses of consumerism, audit, and accountability (e.g. Bragg, 2007; Nolas, 2015); and the exclusion of disadvantaged children from participatory frameworks (e.g. Lüküslü and Walther, 2021; Wyness, 2009). Some studies have also examined cultural interpretations of participation rights (e.g. Bessell, 2009; Duramy and Gal, 2020). Only few studies have addressed which practices do *not* comprise participation (Hart, 1992; Lundy, 2018; Perry-Hazan, 2021).

The current study conceptualizes the intersection of participation and manipulation. Hart's (1992) seminal model listed manipulation among the practices that should not be considered participation. Aside from Hart's model, this intersection of children's participation and manipulation has received scant attention in the literature (see Conner, 2016). There is even a wider gap in the literature regarding guidelines that may help evaluate the ethics of children's participation in collective decision-making (Mitra, 2018; Perry-Hazan, 2021).

Hart's participation ladder

Hart's seminal typology of children's participation—*The Participation Ladder*—classified eight rungs, each signifying increasing levels of participation. Hart drew on a model of adult participation (Arnstein, 1969) and reformulated the ladder's levels. Hart himself noted that the ladder should not be considered a simple measuring stick, and several studies challenged and further developed his model (for a review, see Thomas, 2007). However, the Participation Ladder remains one of the most influential models of

children's participation in research and practice, particularly in addressing non-participation examples (Lundy, 2018; Shier, 2001; Thomas, 2007).

The five upper levels of Hart's ladder present participation levels that meet the UNCRC's rationales. These levels, from the highest to the lowest, are (a) *child-initiated practices that share decisions with adults*; (b) *child-initiated and directed practices*; (c) *adult-initiated practices that share decisions with children*; (d) *adult consultation with children*; and (e) *assigning specific roles to children*. The Hart model's three lower levels allude to nonparticipatory practices: (f) *tokenism*, (g) *decoration*, and (h) *manipulation*.

Tokenism describes instances in which children are ostensibly given a voice but, in practice, have little or no discretion regarding the subject and how it is presented and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions (Hart, 1992). Recently, Lundy (2018: 340) revisited the concept of tokenism and argued that it should not be considered a "dirty word" when children participate in collective decision-making. Her studies indicated that for some children, tokenistic participation could become a positive learning experience that can be galvanized into further action and assist children in claiming recognition in other ways. Moreover, Lundy argued that decision-makers might deliberately use the "defense of tokenism" to avoid engagement with children, assuming that it is better to do nothing at all than engage in a form of non-participation (351).

Decoration, the second rung from the bottom of the ladder, refers, for example, to occasions when children are given T-shirts related to some cause and may sing or dance at an event in such attire but have little understanding of the cause and have no say in organizing the event (Hart, 1992). Hart claimed that "decoration" is considered one rung above "manipulation" because, for decoration, adults do not maintain that the cause is children-inspired.

Manipulation is the lowest rung of the Participation Ladder. Hart defined manipulation as instances where "children have no understanding of the issues and hence do not understand their actions," with adults using children's participation to achieve their own ends (9). His examples of manipulation include preschool children carrying political placards concerning the impact of social policies or adults who collect children's drawings of an ideal playground and, in some "hidden manner," synthesize the ideas to present "the children's design for a playground" (9). Hart's examples were limited to young children, and he did not further develop the dynamics of the intersection of participation and manipulation. The following section reviews studies that may help analyze this intersection.

Theoretical insights on manipulation in social-organizational contexts

The concept of *manipulation* has been explored in various fields, such as marketing, physics, computer science, medicine, and therapy, carrying diverse meanings (see Sorlin, 2017; Van Dijk, 2006). Some studies have explored manipulation in political contexts and social networks (e.g. Cabrejas-Peñuelas, 2017; Förster et al., 2016; Sorlin, 2017), and adult participation in participatory research (Allain et al., 2006; see also Kesby, 2007). These contexts typically involve manipulation by individual agents.

The current study focuses on manipulation embedded in a social-organizational context. The closest framework that may facilitate analyzing such manipulation is Van Dijk's (2006) triangulated approach to manipulation, focusing on political manipulation between groups and their members (rather than personal manipulation of individual social actors). Van Dijk defined manipulation as a "communicative and interactional practice, in which a manipulator exercises control over other people, usually against their will or against their best interests" (360). This definition is based on three characteristics: (a) *Socially*, manipulation is defined as illegitimate domination confirming social inequality. Van Dijk stressed that the definition is not based on the manipulators' intentions or the recipients' awareness of being manipulated but on the societal consequences. (b) *Cognitively*, manipulation as mind control involves interference with processes of understanding, thus facilitating the formation of biased mental models that influence beliefs and ideologies. For example, a very emotional event might be used to influence individuals' mental models as desired. (c) *Discursively*, manipulation involves the usual forms and formats of ideological discourse, such as emphasizing "Our" plusses" and "Their" minuses (359).

This definition of manipulation distinguishes it from proximate concepts. One such concept is persuasion. Sorlin (2017) viewed manipulation on a continuum between the two poles of persuasion and coercion. Persuasion brings the target to consent to the persuader's position, using means that would neither conceal nor unduly foreground some information and would not seek to control the hearer's cognitive environment. According to Sorlin, manipulation involving coercion entails forcing an individual into specific actions (through linguistic/pragmatic—not physical—means).

Another proximate concept is *indoctrination*, a widely discussed practice in the study of moral education (e.g. Copp, 2016; Croce, 2019; Merry, 2018). The definition of indoctrination has been debated in the scholarly literature (See review in Tan, 2004; Taylor, 2017). Its prominent definitions comprise two primary features: asymmetry of authority and an outcome of closed-mindedness (Croce, 2019; Merry, 2018), resembling Van Dijk's (2006) definition of manipulation. However, indoctrination does not necessarily involve cognitive and discursive tactics. Despite the cited distinctions between manipulation, persuasion, coercion, and indoctrination, they may be interrelated in various contexts, and their boundaries may be blurred.

The interrelations of participation and manipulation have been addressed with regard to children who participate in decisions that concern them as part of their parents' divorce proceedings or domestic abuse (e.g. Bernet et al., 2015; Morrison et al., 2020). However, the domestic context is not pertinent to the current study, which focuses on children's collective participation. Only a single study examined between-group manipulation in the context of children's participation. Conner (2016) explored adult civic leaders' views of youth organizing and youth organizers. Her findings differentiated between the various grounds on which adults discounted or defended youth organizers. One of the grounds for discounting youth organizers was the belief that adults manipulate these youth. This belief seemed rooted in a concern that youth organizers were not being trained to analyze issues from multiple perspectives, understand the complexity of social problems, or act independently. Conner's study drew on the literature on youth organizing and thus did not

account for Hart's model. As she examined adult critics of manipulation rather than actual practices of manipulation, she suggested that future research explore questions concerning the authenticity of youth organizing and how organizations can demonstrate that they do not coopt youth to serve a predetermined agenda. The current study addresses this gap in the literature.

Research design

This research explored the intersection of youth participation in collective decision-making and its manipulation by adults. We explored this intersection in the context of youth participation in a conflict between youth organizations. The research field comprises Israeli youth organizations (termed *youth movements*), whose ideology is grounded in a comprehensive ethos of youth leadership and participation (see Cohen, 2015). In 2018, O1 sought to split from O2, which had provided it with an organizational umbrella. The background of the conflict is described in the Findings section. As the conflict unfolded, we decided to design a study to explore the youth's participation in it, examining the dynamics of youth's collective participation in strategic decision-making. The focus on the intersection of participation and manipulation emerged from the data.

The study was based on qualitative methodologies. We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 21 youth aged 15–18 (12 girls, nine boys) who had a leading role in O1 in local branches or the national organizational structure and with seven adults (three women, four men) who were involved in the conflict. Of the seven adults, four worked in the conflicting organizations, and the other three had leading roles in municipal decision-making processes regarding O1.

We recruited participants through personal contacts and snowball sampling. Most of the adults and adolescents we approached agreed to participate in the study. Five adolescents initially agreed to participate and later withdrew due to time constraints. The interviews were conducted during 2019–2020. Most interviews were conducted after the crisis was over and the decisions finalized. All seven adults and 12 of the 21 adolescents participated in personal interviews, and the remaining nine adolescents participated in focus groups comprising 2–3 participants each. Most participants ($N = 19$) were interviewed in their homes, workplaces, or local youth clubs. The remaining participants were interviewed online during the local Covid-19 lockdowns ($N = 9$). The interview protocol included questions relating to the youth's role in organizational decision-making processes before and during the conflict and the interviewees' perceptions of the youth's participation. The interviews ranged from 30 to 120 minutes, averaging 59 minutes.

The research procedures were approved by our university's IRB (#163/19). All participants signed informed consent forms, and participants under 18 also provided parental consent. We explained that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point. We omitted the participants' names from the transcripts and used pseudonyms reflecting their gender. Additionally, we eliminated identifying information. Quotations ascribed to participants in this paper are identified by a two-element code comprised of letters (Y = youth; A = adult) and a serial number for each of the two populations. Although five of the youth participants were older than

18 and were hence legally adults, the letter A will refer to the adults who worked in the conflicting organizations or had leading roles in municipal decision-making processes.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. To ensure reliability, each author reviewed the transcriptions independently and recorded suggestions for categories. The first set of themes classified the youth according to their organizational involvement. It also included categories relating to the youth's and adults' perceptions regarding youth participation. At this stage, the analysis revealed practices of manipulation by adults in the process. The clearest manifestations of this phenomenon emerged in the youth's repeatedly using the term "brainwashing" and their condemnation of how adults concealed critical information. We turned to Hart's writing on manipulation and then conducted an extensive "theoretical sampling" to achieve a deeper understanding of the concept of manipulation (Charmaz, 2008: 166–167). This process led us to Van Dijk's (2006) triangulated approach to manipulation. Based on this theoretical framework, we designed another coding scheme that incorporated the manipulation's social, cognitive, and discursive aspects. We used this coding scheme to analyse all the data.

Findings

The Findings section opens with a factual description of the conflict and the youth's intense participation. The subsequent parts analyze the social, cognitive, and discursive characteristics of the manipulated participation that emerged from the data. The final part of the findings focuses on the youth's criticism of the manipulated participation.

Contours of the conflict and the youth's intensive engagement

For dozens of years, O1 was formally affiliated with O2 but was operated by independent institutional frameworks. Over the years, several conflicts transpired between the organizations, escalating to a crisis by the end of 2018. The controversies concerned personal relationships between the two organizations' leaders, O1's desired independence, and the transfer of public funds from O2 to O1.

The crisis began with covert attempts by O1 to become independent and continued with a sudden announcement by the adults working at O1 regarding O1's split from O2. The declaration surprised many stakeholders, including the O1's youth members, the adults working at O2, and local officials responsible for the operation of O1 in different locales. O2's youth members did not take part in the conflict and thus were not interviewed for this study. After a while, the adults working at O1 realized that they could not establish an independent organization that could be recognized as a "youth movement" eligible for public funding due to their inability to meet certain formal requirements. At this stage, O1 had to decide whether to return to O2 or affiliate with another organization. The adults working at O1 began negotiating with O3 regarding a possible merger, although O3 embraced a political ideology differing from the neutral ideology that had traditionally characterized O1.

After many discussions and struggles, each O1 branch needed to decide whether to continue its youth activities with O2 or with O3. The branches that eventually chose to join O3 formed a new organization managed by the adults who had led O1.

Many of O1's youth members, particularly those in 11th and 12th grades anticipating a year of voluntary service in O1 after their high school graduation, took a substantial part in the conflict and invested much time and effort in persuading adult decision-makers. Abigail (Y4) recalled how they prepared to influence decision-makers before a crucial vote: "We prepared for the vote like we never prepared for anything in our lives." Similarly, Dean (Y11) asserted: "We started to really be a part of this struggle… and understood that it's so important." Roy (Y5) described how the youth organized to coordinate their efforts and formed teams responsible for different activities. Their struggle was fierce, manifested in demonstrations and bursting into places where the decisions were made. One prominent track of activity involved a "demonstration tent" in which they camped out for several days. The youth also approached decision-makers directly. Abigail (Y4) described how the youth burst into a municipal meeting:

> We said that we wouldn't be silenced. So, we came and sat outside the assembly, and as soon as they opened the door, we shouted, "It's us. It's our organization. It's us." I couldn't believe that [these words] left my body. And then we said… "Let's go into this assembly. It's our youth organization. Let us in." And we burst in.

Some of the youths recalled how they contacted decision-makers and tried to influence their opinion. As Abigail (Y4) described: "We called people and [persuaded them]… It was a crazy struggle to change people's [opinions] entirely… We are the organization. We are the youth. You won't tell us where to be." Roy (Y5) described how he went with a friend uninvited to municipal officials' homes, seeking to persuade them. Eventually, he and his friends wrote a letter to the mayor, threatening that if the municipality decided to return O1 to O2, the active youth in O1 would no longer serve as the younger members' youth leaders. Social media comprised another track in the struggle. Rachel (Y21) initiated many "demonstration posts" and was willing to confront those who criticized her, accusing her of spreading misinformation.

The following sections describe the youth's intense activity as a manipulated participation embedded in social, cognitive, and discursive aspects. In each of these aspects, we characterize the manifestations of the manipulation.

"It's not a decision-making forum": Adults' domination, confirming unequal social relations

The youth's participation in the conflict was embedded in the adults' domination of strategic decisions, confirming power imbalances. Although the participating youth were expected to participate in O1's decision-making processes according to the organizational youth-led ethos, the organizational structures for youth participation in strategic decisions did not function effectively. The youth members regularly

participated in decision-making regarding activities in their local branches, but they had limited access to strategic organizational decisions at the national level.

The primary participatory platform that should have facilitated youth participation in strategic organizational decision-making nationally was the "Youth Committee," a decision-making forum that comprised the leading youth members of O1. The adults working at O1 stressed that this committee aims to fulfill the organization's participation ideology. Sarah (A8), who worked at O1, asserted in this regard: "The committee's potential is endless… It should be the youth's voice… bring voices that don't reach us… It should initiate sweeping organizational changes."

However, the participating youth lamented that the Youth Committee did not fulfill its objectives. It focused only on social aspects relating to the interactions between the youth and the educational content of the organization's activities. Naomi (Y15) noted that "It's a nice break from my routine… [but] it's not a decision-making forum," Benjamin (Y7) asserted that the committee focused on "low-level decisions," and Dana (Y12) thought that the committee has a potentially "huge power" but the youth "don't use it." Dean (Y11) lamented in this regard that O1 was "afraid" that the Youth Committee would make decisions for the entire organization.

In light of the above, the crisis encountered an organizational culture ill-equipped for youth participation in strategic decision-making. This social setting facilitated manipulative participation.

"They told me many mind-blowing things": Cognitive control

The cognitive aspects of manipulation involve interference with processes of understanding and the formation of biased mental models and social representations such as knowledge and ideologies (Van Dijk, 2006). The youth participants argued that they received partial, one-sided, and incoherent information about the decisions. For example, the youth were told that O1 would form a new independent organization and suddenly discovered it would be part of O3, which had a distinct political ideology. Benjamin (Y7) lamented in this regard: "They told me many mind-blowing things… and then suddenly it's not O1. It's O3 with a different ideology." David (A4), a parent who was involved in the deliberation within his local branch, similarly noted: "The [adults in O1] simply deceived [the adults and the youth]. They led us to believe that joining O3 would be temporary until the establishment of a new independent organization. But it was obvious that it can't happen." Lily (Y9) criticized the adults who did not disclose the interests of O3:

> I heard many adults who said, "O3 is a good organization that saw another organization at risk and jumped to save it without any [ulterior] interests… just to pour money on us." I don't believe it!.. I find it hard to believe that an organization would invest so much money in another organization and then set us free to develop as an independent organization.

Another type of misinformation concerned the decision-making processes. Some of the youth felt that the adults tried to conceal the fact that they had made the decisions before inviting them to participate. Benjamin (Y7) asserted as follows:

> There was a signed agreement with O3 before we made the decision to leave [O2]. I can't accept that… It's so *not* to listen to the youth… They signed off on the future of my organization in a secret and clandestine way, of which we were totally unaware.

Emotions may strongly impact individuals' mental models (Van Dijk, 2006). A prominent manifestation of cognitive control in our study was the participating youth's deep emotional engagement in the crisis. Rachel (Y21) asserted in this regard that "once your emotions are involved, [your participation in decision-making] becomes entirely different." Jasmin (Y3) lamented that she would not be able to organize an activity focusing on dreams like she used to do every year, as her own dreams "were shattered." Abigail (Y4) recalled her emotional response when she received the message about returning to O2: "I felt like being stabbed in the back with a knife… I really, really cried… I felt betrayed… It breaks you." The youth's participation in the struggle strengthened their emotional involvement. Rachel (Y21) recalled her feelings after a conversation with a municipal official who supported returning to O2 and told her that she would feel in O2 the same as she felt in O1: "After a 5-day demonstration [during which] I fought and screamed for my life… Why should I feel the same when I return to O2? I would feel completely defeated."

This deep emotional engagement in the crisis stemmed from the youth's deep involvement with O1. Most of the interviewed youth defined themselves as "yellow" members of O1. *Yellow* defines their attachment to the organization and their high involvement in its routine activities. Lily (Y9) defined this term: "*Yellows* are those who go to a year of service [in the organization, before the army], those who go on all the trips, and who love the organization." "I'm probably considered very yellow," Daniel (Y13) noted, "as I do yellow things… I was always the first to apply for the trips and things like that."

"They played this song in loops": Discursive tactics

The adults who worked at the conflicted organizations adopted a discourse of black-and-white descriptions of the parties, thus facilitating the manipulation. Many study participants noted that adults who worked at O1 repeatedly emphasized that they could not work with O2 and thus may lose their job and salary. Some of the youth participants criticized this approach. For example, Abigail (Y4) noted:

> They said that all the adults responsible for us would be fired. I didn't like that at some point, the discourse about the split became a discourse about the staff. I'm with the staff, and I love them…. But the discourse shouldn't be about them; [it should be] about whether to affiliate with O2 or O3.

Similarly, Benjamin (Y7) criticized a woman who worked at O1 for stressing the fact that she no longer receives a salary:

> She said she didn't receive a salary over the last two and a half months, which seemed so "oh my God, that's terrible," and then I thought: Come on. Stop everything… she wasn't fired… she decided: "I'm not willing to work for [O2]." So how can you argue that you don't receive a salary? Because it's easy to feel sorry for you now?

Moreover, the adults who worked at O1 repeated messages indicating their resistance to returning to O2, which some of the youth called "brainwashing." By illustration, Tammy (Y19) noted that a particular song was repeatedly played at a summer camp, including the lyrics, "never go back [to O2]." Tammy noted: "They played this song in a loop… what a brainwash!" She also recalled how the camp was full of signs reading, "never go back." "That's when I understood that we were brainwashed," she argued, "and no one stops for a minute to think: Why O3? Why do we need it?"

Paradoxically, another discursive tactic prompting the youth to oppose returning to O2 focused on the importance of youth participation. The adults who worked at O1 repeatedly emphasized that "a youth organization belongs to the youth"; thus, the youth should be at the front of decision-making. Ella (Y2) asserted in this regard: "We believe in this declaration, and it became our slogan in the struggle." When such a slogan that the "organization belongs to the youth" is exploited to encourage youth to be active in promoting a particular stance, it may comprise a discursive feature of manipulation.

The youth's criticism of their manipulated participation

In real time, most of the interviewed youth did not challenge their participation in the conflict. However, as most interviews were conducted after the crisis concluded and the decisions were made, the youth could critically reflect on their involvement in the conflict. The quotes in each of the sections above exemplify this criticism. Some of the youth could identify the exact stage at which they understood they were being manipulated. For instance, Abigail (Y4) noted that after several months, the youth "suddenly understood that politics were substantially influencing [the conflict]" and that the situation was more "complex" than what the adults presented to them. "We began feeling that the ground was shaking," Abigail emphasized. Similarly, Rachel (Y21) noted: "We were blind [to the conflict]," reflecting on the youth's participation at the beginning of the conflict. She criticized the adults who took so many "gambles" and "shouldn't have brought politics to the youth movement."

The conflict resulted in deep disappointment among the youth, who felt their voices were ignored in the decision-making processes. Benjamin (Y7) noted in this regard:

> I'll say sadly that the decision was preordained. Everybody knew where we would be… It's shocking that no one asked the youth, "what do you think about that?"… They didn't give us the opportunity to say: "what do you believe in?"

Similarly, Tammy (Y19) lamented that when the youth attended meetings, adults "pretended to listen" and "didn't care at all what we were saying." Some of the youth noted that the consequence of the conflict was that they no longer believed anyone.

Discussion and conclusion

This study explored the intersection of youth participation in collective decision-making and adults' manipulation of the process. To our knowledge, no study has further developed Hart's (1992) brief discussion of manipulation in the Participation Ladder concerning children's participation in collective decision-making, as only a single study addressed the interface between children's participation and manipulation (Conner, 2016). Based on Van Dijk's (2006) triangulated approach to manipulation, we analyzed how the youth who participated in the strategic decision-making of a youth organization that faced a split from another organization were manipulated to serve the adults' agenda.

The first facet of the manipulation was in the social realm, and it concerned adults' domination of strategic decisions, confirming power imbalances between youth and adults. The findings showed that the manipulation of youth participation emerged in an organizational environment that did not offer the youth spaces for participation in strategic decisions. The youth members regularly participated in the decision-making regarding O1's activities in their local branches. However, the organizational platform intended for youth participation in strategic decisions to influence the entire organization had not operated effectively even before the organizational crisis. These findings indicate that structured spaces for participation in routine and strategic organizational decisions are crucial for preventing manipulation (see Lundy, 2007).

The second facet of manipulation concerned cognitive control. The findings showed that the youth received only partial, one-sided, and incoherent information about the decision-making process. The influence of cognitive control intensified due to the participating youth's deep emotional engagement in the organization and in the crisis. The youth used strong sentiments, like "shattered dreams" and "knife in the back," to demonstrate this emotional engagement and described the impact of the conflict on their lives.

The last facet of manipulation involved discursive tactics, introduced by the adults, characterized by black-and-white descriptions of the conflicting organizations and repeated messages of resistance to the merger with O3, which some youth termed "brainwashing." Paradoxically, the slogan that the "organization belongs to the youth," which became dominant in the conflict, facilitated the manipulated participation.

The consequence of these multiple facets of manipulation was intense youth participation, which manifested in their investing much time and effort in influencing the adult decision-makers, organizing demonstrations, and bursting into sites where the decisions were made. Such intense participation characterizes the highest rungs of Hart's Participation Ladder. However, our study identifies a thin boundary between youth leadership and their being manipulated. Tokenism and decoration cannot be confused with the highest levels of Hart's ladder. Manipulation is much more difficult to discern, as

it may entail children's commitment to a specific goal and manifests in participatory practices reflecting this commitment. Children's deep engagement may blur the distinction between high-level participation and manipulation.

Thus, the intersection of participation and manipulation is particularly germane to organizational spaces with a strong youth participation ethos, such as youth organizations or democratic (open) schools. This ethos may facilitate high-level participatory practices, but it may also be fertile ground for fostering manipulated participation due to the dominant role of youth activism in the organization's ideology. The intersection of participation and manipulation may also be pertinent to religious organizations or organizations with specific ideologies that are characterized by deep member engagement. Previous research has addressed indoctrination in religious schools (e.g. Merry, 2018; Tan, 2004) but has not examined how indoctrination could fuel participation.

In organizations emphasizing youth leadership and critical thinking skills, their youth may eventually detect the manipulation, as in our study. In real time, most of the youth did not question their role in the conflict. However, after its conclusion, many could critically reflect on their involvement. Their conclusions included their deep disappointment from having their voices ignored in the decision-making processes and losing their trust in the adults they had previously adored.

This study's limitations concern the timing of the interviews and the focus on a single case study. We planned the study while the conflict unfolded, but most interviews were conducted after the decisions were made. Thus, we could not document the manipulation in real time. Nonetheless, the rich data set facilitated a robust analysis of the intersection of participation and manipulation, which may be further analyzed in other contexts. Moreover, it seems that manipulation can be best discerned by stepping back and considering the whole picture rather than solely observing youth behavior. Another limitation concerns the focus on a single case study in one country. However, we believe that our conclusions may be pertinent to various youth-led organizations, particularly in countries with a strong tradition of youth organizing.

One implication of our findings for youth organizations and other participatory frameworks is to ensure the effectiveness of structured spaces where youth participate in all organizational decisions, including strategic ones. Such spaces facilitate an egalitarian environment that precludes the emergence of manipulation. Other implications concern the need to identify the elusive boundary between high-level participation and manipulation. Our study underscores the challenge of identifying this boundary. Adults who facilitate youth participation should proceed cautiously when urging youth participation to achieve an end that also serves their own interests. In such cases, it is best to provide transparent and complete information (see Conner, 2016), avoid cognitive control, and refrain from discursive tactics that persuade the youth to take a specific stance. We do not believe that the adults involved in the explored case intended to manipulate the youth (see Van Dijk, 2006). The rapidly unfolding and intensive events threw them into a situation for which the adults were unready. Therefore, youth organizations should train adult leaders to recognize the ways participation might be embedded in manipulation and acknowledge that manipulation can emerge even in the absence of faulty intentions.

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