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research article

Resistance to epistemic silencing in social services: user tactics for enhancing responsiveness

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This article discusses user participation and social service responsiveness to citizen voices. Drawing on 57 qualitative interviews conducted in France, the evidence collected sheds light on the perception of social service users with regard to participatory processes, the obstacles that prevent them from obtaining institutional responses and the implicit and explicit tactics they mobilise in order to achieve change. The empirical material suggests that when official channels for participation are non-existent or fail to bring about effects, users may mobilise parallel tactics that include identifying institutional shortcuts to bypass unresponsive intermediaries, organising collectively to influence power dynamics, reclaiming participatory spaces and choosing to renounce social support altogether. These tactics are interpreted as a practice of agency and a form of resistance exercised by service users faced with epistemic silencing.

Keywords social services • participation • co-production • responsiveness • democracy • epistemic silencing

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Introduction

The injunction for citizens to participate in the conduct of public affairs (Blondiaux, 2022) has not bypassed social work. Users of social services have increasingly been called upon to take part in processes and bodies within the organisations and institutions that support them. In France, for example, the 2002 law on the renewal of social and medico-social action, updated in 2024, mandates the establishment of *Conseil à la Vie Sociale* (CVS) ('social life councils') in services that provide 'accommodation or continuous day care or an activity of assistance through work' (Article D311-3). These councils are composed of at least two representatives of service users, one staff representative and a representative of the managing body. They meet at least three times per year to provide an opinion on a range of matters, including internal organisation and everyday life in the service (use of space, maintenance and relations between users, residents and staff). In the policy field, democratic innovations like citizens' assemblies or other deliberative spaces at national, regional and local levels offer new spaces for users to provide their inputs to the design and delivery of social policy and practice. While the 'participatory turn' has been studied extensively by scholars of democratic theory, the focus has largely been on the quality of the processes rather than on their impact (Pogrebinschi and Ryan, 2018).

In a recent qualitative study conducted by a team of researchers in France as part of a larger Horizon Europe-funded project, we studied how social service users experience participation and the extent to which they perceive participatory processes as responsive to inputs. The research focused on users with the experience of social services in one or more of these three sectors: child protection (including both parents and youth); services for youth at risk of social exclusion; and services in the field of mental health and disability. Between November 2023 and March 2024, our team interviewed 57 people in various locations in France. The evidence collected sheds light on the perception of social service users with regard to participatory processes and channels, as well as the implicit and explicit tactics they mobilise to obtain institutional responses and thus resist the epistemic silencing (Dotson, 2011) they are subject to. The empirical material suggests that when official channels for participation in various perimeters of social services are non-existent or fail to bring about changes, users may mobilise parallel tactics that include identifying 'institutional shortcuts' to bypass unresponsive intermediaries, 'getting organised' collectively (Lister, 2021) to influence the power dynamics present between social services and users, 'reclaiming' invited (Cornwall, 2004) or induced (Mansuri and Rao, 2013) spaces, and 'exiting' (Hirschmann, 1970), that is, choosing to renounce social support altogether.

The aim of this article is to clarify how social service users may perceive participatory processes initiated by social services and public institutions, identify the obstacles that prevent them from engaging with such spaces, and describe the alternative pathways they forge to get their messages across and (re)claim control over their lives. Our intention is to contribute to a better understanding of participation where people are subject to 'social disqualification' (Paugam, 1991) or are holders of 'epistemically disadvantaged identities' (Tuana, 2006). The intention of this analysis has an explicitly normative aim: to improve the responsiveness of services and institutions to those voices by pointing out how and why existing participatory spaces may be lacking, inappropriate or ineffective and how service users nonetheless seek to have their voices heard.

We first present the conceptual background of the study in the second section and the context of user participation in social services in France in the third section. We then outline the participatory and qualitative methodology designed for this study in the fourth section and, drawing on empirical material, outline the obstacles that may prevent social service users from engaging with official participatory processes and the tactics they instead adopt to amplify their voices in the fifth section. The underlying theme of this article is a tendency observed among interviewees in our sample, namely that social service users demand greater participation, especially practices that go beyond mere consultation (Hofer et al, 2024). When official channels are lacking or ineffective, some users design creative agentic tactics – whether implicit or explicit – to get their points across. The discussion in the sixth section reflects on these findings and seeks to draw out why they might be relevant to the literature on participation and responsiveness within social services in France and beyond. The seventh section concludes.

Conceptual background

Scholars of political theory have observed a recent 'participatory turn' in many democracies, with a growing injunction (Blondiaux, 2022) and expectation for citizens to participate in the conduct of public affairs. This participation may take the form of, for instance, citizens' assemblies, participatory budgets or mini-publics, and they concern issues relevant at local, regional, national and international levels. Such spaces are described by Cornwall (2004) as 'invited', being initiated by institutions, in contrast to 'popular' spaces formed through bottom-up processes. Similarly, Mansuri and Rao (2013) distinguish between 'organic' and 'induced' participation, where the former emerges spontaneously and the latter results from 'large-scale bureaucratically managed processes'. While the exponential growth of participatory practices is applauded by some as a genuine opportunity to democratise society (Fung and Wright, 2003), sceptics point to the potential instrumentalisation of such processes by decision makers and other authority figures, who may open participatory spaces in order to legitimate pre-existing agendas. Others deplore a lack of enthusiasm on the part of citizens themselves, of which only a small fraction accept invitations to participate in democratic innovations initiated by decision makers (on non-participation, see Jacquet and Sainty, 2023).

Meanwhile, participation is a foundational principle in a human-rights-based approach to social work (Mapp et al, 2019). It is understood as the right for people to take part in the decisions that affect them by increasing their access to power (Mapp et al, 2019: 263), and it is closely connected to the notion of self-determination (Leung, 2011). This version of participation contrasts with a broader understanding of the concept, which frequently includes 'weaker' forms of participation, such as consultation. Indeed, Arnstein's (1969) original ladder of participation included eight rungs, of which five were, in fact, labelled as belonging to the categories of 'non-participation' or 'tokenism'. According to Arnstein, only the final three rungs (partnership, delegated power and citizen control) deserve to be considered as forms of citizen power. At those levels of participation, power should be sufficiently distributed so that citizens (here, social service users) are able to affect the outcome of the process, in other words, to 'make the target institutions responsive to their views, aspirations, and needs' (Arnstein, 1969: 25). Recent scholarship has conceptualised the responsiveness of social services as the process of learning from and integrating the experiential knowledge of citizens facing diverse social challenges. It implies that citizens' voices and lived realities influence their individual situations and the design and delivery of social services (Müller et al, 2024).

This responsiveness is crucial for at least two reasons. First, Fiorino's (1990) substantive argument in favour of citizen participation is particularly strong in the case of social service users: the epistemic advantage of persons directly affected by a situation (of disability, mental distress, exclusion, poverty and so on) should make the integration of experiential knowledge into social work interventions a priority for professionals who seek to support them. As John Dewey (1927) pointed out in *The Public and Its Problems*, the cobbler may be best equipped to fix a shoe, but the person wearing it is certainly best positioned to identify where it pinches. Second, as Landemore and Ferreras (2016: 54) note in the context of workplace democracy, 'the unequal distribution of control and decision-power in an environment where individuals spend most of their waking time is prima facie both undemocratic and unjust'. For many users of social services, particularly but not exclusively those in residential care, the service and its staff play a major role in their lives and often strongly impact their present and future.

While in some contexts, including France, the legislation has codified participatory practices into procedural requirements, users and user groups have contributed to challenging 'the narrow consumerist, and often tokenistic forms of involvement' (Ferguson, 2009: 93) that are established by such procedures. Others have concluded that user participation in social services 'remains a slogan, a concept with unrealized potential' (Leung, 2011: 43). In this article, we explore the extent to which that insight is shared by social service users themselves. We explore the obstacles that prevent people from being heard in the services that are intended to support them, and we identify the alternative tactics that they mobilise to reclaim power over their lives.

Participation of social service users in France

Participation of social service users in the fields covered by our research (disability and mental health, child protection, and youth at risk of social exclusion) is enshrined in various legal instruments, both internationally and nationally. The United Nations (UN) human rights framework repeatedly emphasises participation as a right, including in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), UN Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2012), and, of course, UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations, 1966). In France, specific legislation stipulates that social service users must be invited to voice their views within three key perimeters. These perimeters partly overlap with the typology of co-production levels offered by Nabatchi, Sancino and Sicilia (2017).

The first perimeter for participation corresponds to Nabatchi et al's (2017) individual level. In this perimeter, a state actor (for example, a social worker or other practitioner) and a lay actor (that is, the service user) work directly with one another, usually on a bilateral basis. This type of participation theoretically enables the user to voice their feedback on the support received, to share concerns and aspirations, to clarify misunderstandings, and, most importantly perhaps, to provide input on how they wish to be supported in the form of a personal plan. For example, in France, the legal framework on child protection stipulates that each child (and their legal guardians) in alternative care should benefit from a personal plan, intended to 'guarantee his or her physical, mental, emotional, intellectual and social development' (Article L. 223-1-1 of the Code de l'action sociale et des familles).

In the second perimeter, users participate in designated invited spaces within social services in order to provide input concerning the management and organisation of the service. Here, unlike Nabatchi et al (2017), we distinguish between two possible forms of participation. The first is individual, for example, where service users make suggestions anonymously through an idea box or fill out satisfaction surveys. The second channel is group based, where service users are invited to participate in meetings or delegate a peer to represent them. Unlike the first perimeter, where potential benefits to participation are largely personal, in the second perimeter, the possible gains may be personal, social or both (Nabatchi et al, 2017). In France, an example of the second perimeter of participation is the CVS, a consultative mechanism introduced in 2002 that is mandatory in many social and medico-social services that provide accommodation or continuous day care to users.

The third perimeter concerns collective participation, where service users or other citizens directly concerned by social policies are invited to provide their input and feedback at the request of public authorities (local, regional or national). This participation can take the form of a temporary or ad hoc citizen assembly or a permanent consultative committee. This perimeter seeks primarily to achieve social benefits (though spillover effects may also yield personal benefits for participants [Nabatchi et al, 2017]). At the national level in France, examples include such instances as the Council for User Involvement hosted by the French National Authority for Health (HAS), a body that cuts across various sectors in the social and socio-medical fields, as well as the National Consultative Council for Persons with Disabilities (CNCPH). At the sub-national level, the French *départements* are required by law to put in place a departmental citizenship and autonomy council (CDCA), which includes the participation of representatives of older persons and persons with disabilities. The three perimeters are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Perimeters of participation in social services and social policy (France)

Perimeter	Objective	Form	Example
First	Provide input concerning one's own case	Individual	Appointment with a case worker or via phone, email and so on
Second	Provide input concerning service management and organisation	Individual	Suggestion box, survey
		Group	User meetings with staff (direct or representation)
Third	Provide input on social policies	Collective	Citizen assembly or consultative committee

Source: Adapted from Nabatchi et al, 2017.

The participation of service users in the organisations and institutions that are intended to support them appears to be an emergent priority in France. Adopted in 2018, the French *Stratégie nationale de prévention et de lutte contre la pauvreté* ('Poverty Strategy'), introduced by President Emmanuel Macron and then Minister for Health and Solidarities Agnes Buzyn, designated participation and the renewal of social work as key levers for combating poverty. However, beyond this stated commitment to participatory practices, little attention has been devoted to assessing the impacts or effectiveness of participation in the French social sector.

Methodology

The research was conducted using a qualitative approach with participatory components. Although far from the ideals of emancipatory or user-controlled research (Beresford, 2003), the project sought to involve persons with the experience of social services in the three sectors (child protection, youth at risk of social exclusion and disability/mental health) in order to participate in framing the research, contributing to reflections on selection, recruitment and ethics, analysing and interpreting the evidence collected through interviews and focus groups. The research project received ethical clearance from the University of Innsbruck, a partner and coordinator of the Horizon Europe research project 'Increasing Responsiveness to Citizen Voice in

Social Services Across Europe' (RESPONSIVE), from which this article is drawn. All participants – those contributing to the participatory advisory boards and those participating through interviews or focus groups – signed a consent form prior to partaking in any research activities.

Creation of participatory advisory boards

To inform the research process, participatory advisory boards (hereafter, 'boards') for the three sectors were created. These consisted of three to four persons with past or ongoing experience as users of social services, recruited through the networks of researchers and practitioners involved in the project.

Members of the boards agreed to take part in the research process for a period of approximately six months, and they agreed to a payment of €25 per hour of interaction with the research team, whether in person or online. The research team at the university committed to including the names of the board members on the research report after obtaining their explicit validation of the report's final draft. Board members were informed that they would be invited to join the project's national advisory board after the six months of research had been completed.

The boards were regularly consulted by the research team. In a first step, they contributed to the development of the methodological tools (interview and focus-group guides), suggesting relevant questions and refining formulations. In a second step, the boards reflected on recruitment strategies and selection criteria for the interviews and focus groups. It was decided that potential informants had to be current or past users of social services in France, and to ensure that research outcomes would be relevant with regard to current policy and practices, we sought to recruit participants who had had experience with social services within the past three years at most. When informants were recruited through social services, they could not be current users of those services. This was a rule suggested by the boards to ensure that (non-)participation in the research would not affect the relationship between practitioners and service users. In such cases, participants had to have left the service at the time of the interview; they also had to be adults and indicate their willingness to participate by signing a consent form prior to participating in research activities. Exceptionally, where an informant was under 18, they could participate if they and their guardian provided written consent for them to do so.

Interviews and focus groups

The recruitment strategy consisted of three channels: (1) social services or social workers themselves (for example, staff working in foster homes and residential services for people with disabilities and streetworkers supporting unhoused youth); (2) user organisations (for example, community-based organisations bringing together people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and grass-roots or self-help groups) and other non-governmental organisations; and (3) snowball sampling through the research team's and boards' respective networks. The intention was to involve users of a diverse range of social services across various locations in France rather than to recruit participants from a single service or service type. In this way, we sought to recruit persons with varying experiences. In practice, most of the informants we met were recruited through the second and third channels.

A total of 57 persons participated in the research through 30 individual interviews and four focus groups. The interviews were conducted in person or online and lasted between approximately 30 minutes and two hours. Focus groups were conducted in person only and lasted between one and two hours. Each participant received a gift voucher of €25 per hour of interaction with the research team. In all cases, the interviews and focus groups were audio recorded with participants' permission. The questions centred on their experiences with participatory processes and their perception of the effects of that participation.

Table 2 provides an overview of the number of informants who participated in the research, provided according to the sector of their experience and according to gender. As shown, the sample included three times more men than women, in contrast to the general tendency observed in qualitative research (Daly and Kelly, 2015). While the collection of data related to race or ethnicity is heavily regulated by law in France (see, for example, Farkas, 2017), the research team observed significant diversity among the individuals and groups participating in the research; moreover, approximately one fifth of participants specified that they were born outside of France and had immigrated from countries in the Global South, mainly from Africa. It should also be noted that although a number of informants had experiences in two or three of the sectors studied, their inputs in the interviews or focus groups focused primarily on one of the three sectors.

Table 2: Overview of informants in the data-collection process

Sector	Number of informants (interviews)	Number of informants (focus groups)	Gender ratio (female [F]/male [M])
Disability and mental health	7	18	5F/20M
Youth at risk of social exclusion	12	9	5F/16M
Child protection – youth	8	0	2F/6M
Child protection – parents	3	0	2F/1M
Total	30	27	14F/43M

Collective thematic analysis

To analyse the evidence collected through the interviews, we used a collective thematic analysis, where the lead researcher and participatory advisory boards jointly analysed excerpts from the interviews and focus groups. First, the audio recordings were transcribed by a professional transcription company. The research team then listened to the audio recordings again to verify the accuracy of the transcriptions and correct any errors. Next, key excerpts relating to the two overarching themes of participation and responsiveness were selected from the data sets and anonymised. These excerpts constituted the data subset that was then analysed together with the boards.

Following an introduction by the lead researcher concerning the key phases of a research process and a brief presentation of the basic principles and steps for conducting a thematic analysis of qualitative data, approximately 30 anonymised excerpts were displayed around the room (as an 'excerpt expo'). The board members were invited to briefly read through them, then select those they were most interested in analysing.

In pairs or in groups of three, they then read through the fragments once or twice in order to familiarise themselves with the texts, annotating them and marking them up wherever desirable. Next, the pairs or groups discussed each of the selected excerpts one by one, verifying that the fragments were clear to each person. Here, the objective was to ensure a shared understanding of the data. If helpful to shed light on the meaning of the fragment at hand, the researcher (who had conducted the interviews) was able to provide contextual information regarding the informant's situation while maintaining their anonymity.

Next, the pairs/groups began coding the data together. Each group received Post-its and noted down the key codes identified for each fragment. These could be one or several words that described the content of the data succinctly and precisely. Once all excerpts had been coded, each pair/group presented their Post-its to the team one by one, explaining why they had formulated the code as such and what they meant to convey by the selected word or phrase. As the analysis went on, the board began grouping codes together by arranging the Post-its in clusters on a whiteboard. Once all the Post-its had been displayed and the board was satisfied with the way the codes were organised on the whiteboard, the outcome was discussed and reflected upon. The team deliberated about the overlaps between different codes, the nuances and the relationships between them, constructing themes and concepts relevant to the research project. After this phase of collective thematic analysis with the members of the board, the lead researcher uploaded all the transcribed data into the software Atlas.ti and proceeded with coding the data set using new codes and those generated in collaboration with the board to complement and refine the key themes.

Findings

The interview and focus-group guides asked informants to discuss their experiences of participation. Various participatory spaces within the three perimeters outlined earlier were evoked by informants, though the main focus was on individual and service-based participation. Individual participation occurred in bilateral meetings between users and practitioners, in writing (by letter or email) or by telephone. Service-based participation was experienced by users in collective meetings (including CVS, 'house' meetings and so on) or through written evaluations, feedback forms and suggestion boxes. Policy participation included public consultations (for example, at the level of the French *département*), ad hoc meetings with politicians and/or administrations, and other collective forums at the local, regional or national levels. In the latter two perimeters, service-based and policy participation was nearly always of a consultative nature: the organisers of these invited spaces were responsible for framing the process, setting the agenda and listening to the views of service users, which contributed more or less significantly to decisions taken by those in positions of power.

Obstacles to participation

The first important finding identified in the interviews related to the obstacles to participation, in other words, the reasons why the participants had not been able to provide their input (ideas, feedback, questions, complaints and so on) in one or more perimeters. Three main obstacles were identified: (1) non-existent or inappropriate participatory processes; (2) fear of negative repercussions; and (3) lack of responsiveness. First, some interviewees described having little or no opportunities to participate beyond the individual level. In cases across the three sectors, spaces for deliberating on issues beyond one's own 'case' were lacking; this was emphasised especially by parents whose children were in alternative care and by youth at risk of social exclusion, some of whom claimed that group settings were actively discouraged by social service staff. Another obstacle to participation related to practical hurdles, whereby participatory processes were not conceived or adapted to respond to the specific needs of invitees; for example, the processes implied gathering large numbers of people in spaces with bright lights and loud sounds or in spaces inaccessible to people with reduced mobility, de facto excluding service users with certain forms of disability.

Second, an important theme that emerged in some interviews related to the fear experienced by social service users, who appeared to view participation, particularly in the first and second perimeters, as a potential risk. Interviewees described being reluctant to voice their views honestly, to issue complaints or to seek change within social services for fear of losing their rights, being excluded or punished, seeing a relationship (for example, with a caseworker, manager, member of staff or peer) deteriorate, or simply being perceived poorly by professionals and/or fellow social service users. Where interviewees were dependent on the social service in question (for example, because of a lack of alternatives due to scarcity of supply or due to the enforcement of a judicial measure in the case of child protection), this fear was sometimes amplified.

A third major obstacle that prevented social service users from participating in the three perimeters was the conviction that participation would not lead to positive change. For some, this was based on experience; for others, it was an assumption that they made. This (perceived) lack of responsiveness was attributed by some interviewees to be the result of the staff's paternalistic attitude towards social service users and a denial of their capacity to think and act in their own best interest. Others experienced participatory processes as tokenistic box-ticking exercises that did not aim to feed into better practices and policies but merely to appease service users. For them, evidence of this tokenistic approach was the constitution of various bodies and committees entrusted to deliberate on issues that were, in fact, outside of their remit, thus making any evolutions or possible changes impossible. Finally, some informants explained that a challenge for responsiveness was obstructions in the information flow within social services. Although front-line workers or other staff may be attentive to the suggestions, feedback and aspirations of users, these information signals appeared, in their view, to get lost in the hierarchical organisation of the services.

Alternative tactics for enhancing responsiveness

The analysis of the interviews and focus groups showed that a subsample of social service users resorted to alternative tactics to voice their views. A number of interviewees expressed frustration with social workers and social service management, who either did not offer spaces to voice their views or did not appear responsive to their input and feedback. In the following excerpt, a focus group with unhoused youth revealed the violent consequences of feeling repeatedly ignored or dismissed as a social service user:

Mike: To get them to listen to us, it's either wait 15 years or beat the crap out of each other to get them to listen to us. Most of the time, that's what you have to do if they won't listen to you. We have to get in their faces to make them listen to us.

Researcher: What do you mean, 'to get in their faces'?

Mike: When you talk, they don't listen. And when you fight with someone, they listen to you.

Steve: It's true. Sometimes, you have to slap them. Sometimes, you have to slap someone's head to make them understand. You tried to explain. You were polite. You used the right words, carefully chosen words … but in the end, the guy doesn't understand; pie in the face. I'm sick of repeating myself; I'm not a jukebox.

Faced with unresponsiveness and inaction, some interviewees described mobilising one of the tactics described in the following subsections, while others pursued a combination of two or more of them.

Bypassing social service professionals

In the child protection sector, several participants explained that they had sent letters to the judge in charge of their file in order to change their situation. Others described reaching out to independent authorities, such as the ombudsperson, to make their case known. Bypassing social services to obtain responsiveness from authorities with power over their situation was an individual approach put in place by social service users seeking mainly to influence their own (or their family's) situation. Marine, a young woman who was in foster care for most of her childhood, had successfully bypassed child protection services by targeting the judge directly with her request after experiencing long periods of unresponsiveness from social workers:

Marine: My brother and I did it once. We'd just come back from an appointment where we'd been left alone for about 20 minutes…. My father had a fit of dementia, and my brother and I found ourselves all alone. When we finished the appointment, we weren't feeling well, and when the foster family came to take us home, she asked us what had happened. We told her. That same evening, she told us: 'Write a letter to the judge, I'll send it the next day by registered mail….' In this letter, we asked to space out the visits and to never leave us alone in the room.

Researcher: And what impact did this have?

Marine: From then on, we had a visit once a month, and my mom's requests to see us alone were withdrawn.

Getting organised

While bypassing social services appeared to be primarily an individual tactic, 'getting organised' was presented by participants as a collective approach to achieving change. It included several forms of actions: engaging in participatory research projects involving social service users; organising self-help or self-advocacy groups; participating in civil society organisations; and seeking the support of potentially effective allies to lobby for change. In all cases, getting organised appeared as a way of enhancing the 'power together' of service users (Tew, 2006). Ruth Lister (2021: 168) usefully describes the obstacles and constraints to exercising this form of collective agency, which include the difficulties of transforming 'a negatively ascribed category into the positive affirmation of categorical identity' upon which to base political action. Despite this, our interviews revealed a significant level of participation in self-help or self-advocacy groups and other forms of collective action, which is likely to be the result of our recruitment strategy (see the 'Methodology' section). This collective action was described by some as a way of attempting to create change, not necessarily for oneself, but for other social service users in the present and future. Isabelle, a mother whose child had been in foster care, described the specific policy impacts of a collective action she had engaged in. She also pointed out the positive impacts that this experience had had for her personally:

> I think that was a strength for me, to find myself with people who had been through the same thing as me. Before, I felt isolated and ashamed. And the fact that I was talking to people who had been through the same thing as me was a plus; it helped me put the placement into perspective and the fact that my son had been put into care and that it was part of my history and part of my story.

In another interview, Maximilien, a service user in the disability/mental health sector, described having launched a nationwide petition to modify an existing practice after having sought to raise the issue with the director of his social service. As he explained:

> I've already brought it up [in the social service]. I spoke about it with my former director, who was ambiguous, because he told me, 'I agree with you', but in the end, that's what's ambiguous about it. When you talk to these people, they are aware of the problem, but in the end, they don't move. So, we're stuck.… In my opinion, the guy put me to sleep a bit because, as I could see, he was beating around the bush and, in the end, didn't answer any of my questions.

'Reclaiming' invited spaces

A third tactic deployed by social service users frustrated by the lack of responsiveness they experienced consisted of reclaiming existing participatory processes. Two informants (one from the child protection sector and the other from the disability/mental health sector) described efforts to take ownership of their services' CVS. In one case, a group of social service users gathered to reframe the rules and functioning of the representative body in a way that felt more likely to encourage broader participation. The intention of the group was to move away from the rigid norms, rules and processes of a CVS and instead create a space where staff and service users could discuss problems and ideas together. As Dominique, a service user in the disability/mental health sector, explained:

> I'm not saying it makes everything better, because the director is still stuck in her injunctions, but at least when she comes to listen to us, she's on the same footing as everyone else, and there's no CVS chairman; there's just so-and-so, and everyone's on the same footing.… Why am I telling you this? It's not to take a swipe at the CVS system; it's to tell you that they rebelled because they took ownership of the system. They said, 'Now, that's what we want.' And that's where it gets interesting because even staff who were reluctant, who were suspicious of the idea of us taking power, well, now, even staff, when they have something to say, they come and say it over coffee and cake.

In the second example, Gaëtan sought to dynamise his service's CVS. As a youth in foster care, he had observed that the representative body had considerable potential to carry the voices of the service's users, but it was hardly attended, and the other service users were unenthusiastic about participating in its meetings on a regular basis. Gaëtan used various ways to get his peers on board, for example, by explaining the role of the CVS, informing other youth about its existence and spreading the message through a video, and the CVS meetings gradually became an important space for dialogue and decision making. As he explained:

> After that, we saw that the youth were more willing to participate. They understood what was at stake; they knew that it could be beneficial for them and that it could improve their everyday living conditions. They said to themselves: 'OK, this is good. This thing is actually for us.' But maybe when it's said by a social worker, it has less impact than when it's said by a young person like them. That's what I found interesting is that in this case, I was the one, but it could have been anyone else; it was just necessary for someone young to understand the issues and make them explicit [to others] in their own way.

'Exiting'

The three tactics described in the previous subsections are mainly constructive approaches that some social service users may mobilise to achieve change and have their voices heard where official spaces or channels for participation are non-existent or ineffective. A fourth tactic that emerged from the fieldwork was the option of renouncing social support altogether. Clearly, this was not a feasible option for all interviewees: in the child protection sector, a majority of the parents and youth interviewed had experienced legal measures that constrained their possibility to 'exit' from social services. In the disability/mental health sector as well, it was not possible for some of the interviewees to simply 'exit', given the significant, nearly vital support they were receiving from the services in question. In some cases, however, it appeared that the informants considered renouncing the support of social workers and social services or had effectively renounced it already. When she was asked what sort of support she expected from social services today, Alex, an unhoused young woman who had spent most of her childhood in foster care, responded quickly: 'I don't expect anything from them, that's for sure.' In another interview, a young man, Jules, who was also living on the streets at the time of the interview, explained that he had felt constrained and disempowered in his foster home. On his 18th birthday, he made the decision to leave, despite being offered a new form of support by the social service. He described it as follows:

Jules:	When I turned 18, I simply said, 'Look, I'd like to try and find my family and leave.' So, I left.
Researcher:	And they accepted that?
Jules:	They didn't have much choice.
Researcher:	Yes, you were of age.
Jules:	I took my things and left. They said, 'Do you want to sign the contract for young adults?' I tore it up and left.

In the disability/mental health sector, Paul evoked the possibility of leaving the training programme he was enrolled in with a social service in case he experienced unresponsiveness. He was satisfied with the programme and the support received but admitted not having clarity about the possibilities for voicing his views and/or providing suggestions to the management and staff. In the absence of established and effective feedback mechanisms, Paul considered that he was also free to leave, acknowledging that this is not the case for all service users:

> But I guess that in my case, in my programme, I can always say 'It doesn't suit me; I'm leaving', and then that's it, it stops.… I think that people who are either underage or in situations where they're not independent and have to be … where they can't say, 'I'm leaving', it's complicated. In my situation, there's always the possibility of saying, 'I'm quitting.'

Insofar as radical social work requires social workers to 'back off' when their presence or support is not welcome (Ferguson, 2009), this fourth and final strategy ('exiting') bears a powerful message to policy makers and practitioners about the risks of unresponsiveness.

Discussion

The results presented earlier are significant at several levels. First, they provide insights about the shortcomings and limits of participatory processes within the three perimeters of participation. They point to the divergent experiences of social service users with participatory spaces, and they provide clues into the rationale for non-participation: among other reasons, users may face practical hurdles that obstruct their participation; they may fear negative repercussions if they speak out; and they may not wish to spend time and energy deliberating in user boards, committees and commissions that effectively do not exercise power or weigh in significantly on decisions made by social service management. Identifying those reasons (and others) might help to shift the interpretation of non-participation from a sign of disempowerment or indifference to a rational choice that minimises risk.

Second, the results presented in this article suggest that for some social service users, the fear they experience or the unresponsiveness they face when their requests, input or aspirations are dismissed or shut down, may be understood as a phenomenon that extends beyond individual experience; instead, the experience of fear, of repercussions or of unresponsiveness could be symptomatic of broader injustices that persist in some areas of social work and social services. Peter Beresford (2013) cites Chris Jones (1996: 197), a UK social work commentator, who described the 'legacy whereby clients are too often disregarded, not listened to and generally presented as people who don't count'. This type of pattern, which might be observed as persisting today and beyond the UK, might be interpreted as what Dotson (2011: 241) has called a 'practice of silencing': a repetitive, reliable occurrence of epistemic violence. Indeed, repetitive epistemic violence occurs when the inputs expressed by service users are routinely ignored or dismissed because their identity – whether that of a child in care, an unhoused young man or woman, a parent whose child has been placed into alternative care, or a person with a mental or physical disability – is a cause for their credibility to be questioned, their experiential knowledge to be doubted and their capacity as a knower to be undermined (see also Fisher, 2023).

Third, faced with these negative experiences in formal participatory spaces, service users sometimes turn towards parallel tactics, mobilising themselves individually or collectively to be heard and to try to effect change. This shadow participation, or 'infrapolitics' (Scott, 1990), is essential to observe as the active manifestation of agency and political life of social service users. Observing these parallel tactics may help us to understand how and why service users seek to renegotiate power relations (Scott, 1990: 190), where they perceive decision-making power to be located and whom they identify as allies. Importantly, paying attention to these less visible forms of participation recognises the agency that service users exercise discreetly, the knowledge they hold with regard to hierarchical structures, communication channels and staff roles, and the competences they develop and exercise to bypass unresponsive staff, to organise collectively and to reclaim invited spaces. We interpret the alternative tactics mobilised by social service users as a form of resistance to the epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) and silencing experienced by those individuals and groups, which may be more subversive and effective because they can circumvent what Malcolm Carey (2019) identifies as the 'paradoxes of participation'. Recognising resistance as a form of agency is often denied to people experiencing poverty or other forms of disadvantage, who are regularly perceived as passive 'in either the benign form of the helpless victim or the malign spectre of the lazy, work-shy, welfare dependant' (Lister, 2021: 122).

Limitations and further research

The findings discussed earlier provide some insight into how users of social services in France perceive participatory channels and the responsiveness of the services they use. However, the empirical evidence does not provide a complete picture of the alternative tactics that social service users may mobilise, the extent to which those tactics are experienced as effective or how widespread they are among service users. Indeed, the data collected do not allow us to quantify the proportion of research participants who engaged in one or more (or other) forms of alternative tactics. We know from our recruitment strategy that approximately half of the research participants were involved in some form of collective dynamic outside the service, and future research could investigate the role of collective spaces or peer groups in fostering participation. It would also be worth analysing the profiles and pathways of those service users who engage in collective actions and how this, in turn, shapes their attitudes and actions (for example, whether their positions are closer to the 'social model stalwarts' or the 'biological citizens' perspective in the case of persons with disabilities [see Hughes, 2009]).

Finally, an important research question relates to the conditions for alternative tactics and practices that occur backstage to expand, transform and grow into social movements that contribute to a counter-democracy (Rosanvallon, 2014) capable of challenging the 'inequitable economic, political and social structures on which participation itself is based' (Carey, 2009: 187). To overlook the efforts, creativity and agency deployed in those parallel spaces is, in the words of James C. Scott (1990: 199), 'to miss the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt.... It is to focus on the visible coastline of politics and miss the continent that lies beyond. Each of the forms of disguised resistance, of infrapolitics, is the silent partner of a loud form of public resistance.'

Conclusion

In 'Rethinking Power', Amy Allen (1998) distinguishes between three forms of power: power over, power to and power with. While user participation in social services is sometimes framed as a way to empower citizens (Mapp et al, 2019), we have shown that participatory mechanisms available to social service users tend to maintain decision making in the hands of staff and management, thus also preserving the latter's 'power over' service users. The involvement of participatory advisory boards in our project allowed us early on in the research to look beyond official channels for participation in social services, keeping our eyes and ears open in the qualitative interviews for 'hidden transcripts' (Scott, 1990) buried under the surface of what one board member described as the reality of the 'perpetually empty suggestion box'. This allowed us to identify the exercise of Allen's two other forms of power: individual resistance ('power to') and solidarity, a collective form of power ('power with').

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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