

Shadow Committees: On “Drug User Voice,” Representation, and Mobilization in a Norwegian Drug Policy Reform

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Abstract

Until recently, Norway remained immovable on its conservative policy that illegal drug use is a crime. In 2018, the Health Minister appointed an inquiry commission to design a less restrictive drug policy, which included two “drug user representatives.” But the Minister’s choices for these posts met massive dissatisfaction from some drug users who contended that the representatives “are not real drug users” and do not “speak for” nor “act on the behalf” of their experiences and opinions. They mobilized to establish an alternative organization, the Shadow Committee, to propose a drug policy reform shaped by “the user voices” and “not polluted by political compromises.” Yet, while performing a labor of difference, this committee, too, became caught in conflicting landscapes of representation with some members contesting strategic solidarity. Based on this case, and an ethnographic fieldwork among the protesters, this article investigates the concept of representation as understood, contested and applied by “drug users.” Exploring how they relate to “user voices” and question the authenticity of some of “user representatives,” I highlight how changing political landscapes affect understandings of representation and shape political, individual and collective forms of involvement. I draw on Pitkin’s political philosophy and apply the classical categorization of political representation to suggest reconsidering the governing assumptions regarding “user representatives” that increasingly inform drug and treatment policies in Norway. I ask if the concept of representation itself may be a barrier to meaningful involvement.

Keywords

activism, drug policy, mobilization, political representation, user representatives, Norway

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Introduction

Persons using drugs are mobilizing worldwide to reject being treated as “sub-human beings” (Bijay Pandey, in Jürgens, 2005) or even “reduced to nothingness” (Bud Osborn, in Zigon, 2015, p. 509). Historically marginalized, criminalized, deprived of their rights, and having their experiential knowledge neglected, they call for a more humane approach to drug use. Uniting through “user organizations,” they demand recognition of their knowledge and inclusion in relevant clinical and political decision making processes (e.g. Anker et al., 2006; Bjerger et al., 2016; Frank et al., 2012; Jürgens, 2005; Madden et al., 2021; van Dam, 2008; Willesrud & Olsen, 2006; Zigon, 2018). In response to these demands as well as general calls for democratizing expertise and policy making, national and global authorities are increasingly including “lay experts,” “service users” and “those to whom it applies” in the development of policies, strategies, plans and regulations. In Scandinavia, political guidelines for health and social care services claim that user participation contributes to citizenship and democracy and, therefore, urge utilizing user’s experiences in order to provide the best possible help, raise quality and guarantee individual rights and autonomy (Gubrium et al., 2016). During its presidency in the Pompidou Group, the Council of Europe’s drug policy cooperation platform, Norway put civil society on the agenda, emphasizing the inclusion of individuals who use drugs in policy development. According to Minister of Health and Care Services Bent Høie:

In Norway, it is a given that user organizations and other representatives of civil society should be heard before a new policy is adopted. They also have a key role in the drug policy debate. This is not the case for all countries. I believe it is essential for Norway and the Council of Europe, which is based on the values of human rights, democracy and rule of law, to emphasize the importance of listening to those to whom this applies. (Norwegian Ministry of Health and Care Services, 2018)

Increasingly, Norwegian rehabilitation institutions hire “drug user¹ consultants,” “experience consultants” or “user representatives” in order to ensure better quality and the involvement of “those to whom it applies” (e.g. Helsedirektoratet, 2014; Helse-og Omsorgsdepartementet, 2015; Oslo kommune, 2020). Higher education institutions invite “user representatives” to teach students about the “user experience” (e.g. Lie et al., 2015) while researchers seeking funding are required to demonstrate “user representation/involvement” (e.g. Forskningsrådet, 2019; Stiftelsen Dam, 2020). In most cases, these representatives are members or leaders of the established organizations and interest associations. This form of involvement in institutions, councils or policies presents specific challenges because the representativeness of the involved actors and—most importantly their significance for the represented—often remains unquestioned. Social movements and activism *are* founded on personal experiences, which they voice (Brown & Zavestoski, 2004; Finkelstein, 1996; Morrison, 2013; Snow & Soule, 2009) and which by definition cannot be contested. However, when the personal shapes policy, questions must be asked: What or whom is “the user voice,” and which voices are authorized and under what conditions?

In this article, I explicate the notion of “user representative” and “representation” in the context of Norway’s 2018 drug policy reform. I show how the above-mentioned conditions are imagined, experienced and practiced by “the affected community.” The scene for these elaborations are the reactions that followed the involvement of “(drug) users representatives” in the Norwegian drug policy reform. Until recently, Norway remained immovable on its conservative drug law. In 2018, the governmental majority agreed to make changes and proposed decriminalization of drug use. Minister of Health and Care Services Bent Høie appointed a public inquiry commission to design a less restrictive drug policy and to draft legislation to move responsibility for sanctions for illicit drug use and possession from the justice to the health sector. The public prosecutor led the commission, which also included the assistant chief of police, scholars, legal and clinical experts and two “(drug) user representatives”

(*brukerrepresentanter*), whose inclusion was the minister emphasized. However, people who use drugs—organized or not—expressed massive dissatisfaction with the selected user representatives, contending they “were not real drug users” and that they did not “speak for” nor “act on the behalf” of users’ experiences and opinions.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork among individuals protesting and mobilizing against the politically authorized “user voices,” I suggest reconsideration of the governing assumptions regarding user participation, which increasingly inform drug and treatment policies. Here, I focus on how the concept of representation was contested and, simultaneously, implemented by the members of an ad-hoc organization, the Shadow Committee, which, too, became caught in the conflicting landscapes of representation and its technical impossibilities.

Based on my case, I argue that the issue at stake is not whether to *involve* “the drug users,” but rather who among those involved is to represent whom. Here, I do not aim to discuss the limits of representative democracy in general, but rather to shed light on how the imagined homogeneity of “drug users” is maintained through and by their representatives, especially when they are criticized by the “affected community.” As such, this article continues scholarly discussions that critically explore the notions of “participation” (e.g. Lancaster et al., 2018), “consumer representation” and “affected community” (e.g. Lancaster et al., 2017) as well as “publics” (e.g. Fraser et al., 2016) within alcohol and other drug policymaking and in the context of deliberative democracy. These works, inspired by Foucauldian perspectives, challenge the ways in which political subjects and public knowledge are imagined as fixed and bounded categories. Recently, “drug user representation” as an emergent political phenomenon has become an object of critical scrutiny (Madden et al., 2021). In their study of representation in the global drug policy setting of the UN, Madden and colleagues conclude that dominant discourses and practices delimit “the political subjectivities available to people who use/ have used drugs and their capacity to bring their voices to bear in this context” (2021, p. 1).

The critical scholars encourage, therefore, to “slow down” and ask what other practices and policies would be possible if “dominant discourses and other taken-for-granted practices were *made otherwise*” (Madden et al., 2021, p. 2). However, missing are experience-near insights into how the members of the “affected communities” and “those represented” understand these categories and, in fact, (re)create phenomena, which the scholars problematize. The ethnographic insights offered in this article support the argument of Fraser et al. (2016) that these categories *are made* in policy processes, while the phenomenon of “drug user representative” is shaped by the inherent structural inequalities underlying the traditional policy making structures (e.g. Bjerger et al., 2016; Madden et al., 2021; Zibbell, 2004). However, I emphasize the agency of the individual members as they respond to involvement processes and, thus, *make* these categories, too. Grappling with these responses is part of “bringing new political subjectivities from below” (Madden et al., 2021, p. 2). Therefore, I work with the concepts of “political representation” and Pitkin’s categorization because they resonate (and discuss) with the logics and empirical concepts I encountered in the field, as well as reflect the language of the Shadow Committee. Including the notion of “authenticity” into the discussion, I also ask if the concept of representation itself may be a barrier to meaningful involvement, a question that Lancaster and colleagues (2017) and Madden and colleagues (2021) explored, among others.

Theorizing Representation and Participation

Even though it is no longer desirable to limit one’s understanding of political representation to elected officials (Grant & Keohane, 2005; Saward, 2006), classical political theories are relevant to the discussion because authorities and elected officials actively and increasingly justify or legitimate their decisions through involving representatives of civil society. This troubles both the concept of political representation and “user representation.” In contexts in which civil society plays an increasingly important role in political and clinical activities, one should take into account the various forms of

political representation and be able to contest “user representatives” in the same way that traditional elected representatives may be contested in modern democracies.

Cotta and Best (2007) defined political representation as an institutionalized system of political responsibility realized through the free electoral designation of certain fundamental political organisms. However, governments increasingly decentralize their decisive power and responsibility, outsourcing decisions to nongovernmental bodies and legitimizing their decisions with “user voices” and user involvement. This dynamic, together with growing deconstruction of expert/lay relationships and democratic expectations inspired by the “nothing about us without us” movement, shape the political in new ways and change individual and collective involvement. Given these changes, our understanding of how public policies are being made, negotiated and implemented must include new forms of political representations that go beyond formal elections (Grant & Keohane, 2005; Saward, 2006). As Dovi (2018) concluded in her entry on “political representation”:

The extent to which interest groups write public policies or play a central role in implementing and regulating policies is the extent to which the division between formal and informal, social and political representation has been blurred. The fluid relationship between the career paths of formal and informal representatives also suggests that contemporary realities do not justify focusing mainly on formal representatives.

Nevertheless, studies of (drug user) activism would benefit from the theories of political representation that focus on elected officials, not only because such theories are analytically relevant, but also because how informal organizations represent their constituencies is, as this article shows, increasingly treated with the same attentiveness, in particular when it comes to their accountability. While the abovementioned critical scholarship asks the vital question: “*What if things were otherwise?*” I ask “*How do the subjects involved understand what is now?*”

Well established within gender, ethnicity and race studies (e.g. Butler 1990, 1998; Dovi, 2002, 2007; Htun, 2004; Minta, 2012; Pantoja & Segura, 2003; Phillips, 1995), discussions on the limits of “representation” are increasingly actualized in disability studies (e.g. Guldvik et al., 2013) and to some degree in social services studies (e.g. Andreassen, 2009; Backe-Hansen, 2001; Kojan et al., 2018). However, in the field of substance use, not only has the assumption been that every representative can make a positive contribution to the issue at hand, but a discussion of representativeness and diversity of experience needs a push. Therefore, current discussions within these fields inform this article. I acknowledge, however, specific historical and political differences between these groups and the ways social movements and activism have been shaped and organized within them (e.g. Anker et al., 2006).

For the Norwegian case, I draw on feminist political theory, in particular, Phillips’ (1995) theory of politics of presence, and on Pitkin’s (1967) political philosophy. Pitkin’s categorization of representation into formalistic, descriptive, substantive and symbolic—albeit contested—is a classical point of departure for discussing political representation. Despite theoretical developments in this field, her reasoning also is a good starting place to investigate user involvement in local and global policy making. Her emphasis on the relation between definition and standards for examining and assessing representation, including conflicting characteristics, speaks the language and logics of the Shadow Committee, which I explore in this article. As I will show, it also illuminates the challenges in quality representation and may help reconcile inconsistent demands.

Pitkin is not without her critics. For instance, Saward (2006) criticized Pitkin for focusing “resolutely on the representative rather than on the represented; the latter is taken as unproblematically given” (p. 300) and called her philosophy “influentially limiting, in that it has encouraged theorists to underplay the subtle processes of constructing the represented, or that which needs to be represented” (p. 304). However, in her outline of political representation, Pitkin (1967) emphasized its contradictory character and, in line with an anthropological viewpoint, she encouraged attention to how cultural

structures or contexts determine the meaning of concepts. This critical attention to the contextual construction of the representation (and thus, representatives and the represented) is missing in the field of drug use, with a few exceptions (e.g. Fraser et al., 2016; Lancaster et al., 2017, 2018).

On the other hand, in their critical approach to Pitkin's focus on representatives as individuals, Dryzek and Niemeyer (2008) emphasized that actors represent discourses, not real people, and proposed a notion of discursive representation to illuminate this role. However, their approach ignores the fact that the people who are represented react to the very people who claim to represent them, not solely the discourse they speak. As an ethnographer who acknowledges the discursive position of subjects, I am interested in what expectations individuals have regarding the social role and the qualities of "drug user representatives" and how idiosyncratic experiences and interpersonal dynamics shaped the Norwegian protests.

Method

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted from June 2018 to December 2019 among those engaged in the protest actions and in the new organization—the Shadow Committee. Having established networks and connections in my previous research, I closely observed the rising engagement around the inquiry commission and I followed discussions online from the very beginning. When those engaged in protests started to meet in person, I joined them during these informal meetings, which led to ethnographic interviews and observations. After the committee was established, I regularly attended its formal and informal meetings and also met its members and affiliates in other arenas (such as conferences or events, including International Overdose Day and Drug User Day at the Norwegian Parliament), although I was not a formal part of the committee or other affiliated groups. In addition to participant observation during the meetings and events, I joined the group on social media and conducted informal interviews with members, the number of whom was never established and was fluctuated during the period. Altogether, I met and interviewed frequently 10 persons who identified themselves as members of the Shadow Committee throughout the period or at some point. I also collected all public writings, such as blogs and newspaper articles, produced by the committee and its allies during this period.

My overall objective with the fieldwork was to explore the development of a user initiative in reaction to political events in Norway. My questions were mainly empirical ones: How does the movement organize? How do they recruit members and on what conditions? How do they cooperate and what will be the outcome of this spontaneous engagement? With time, as the next section will show, the theme of representation emerged as a central issue within the organization. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, I coded ethnographic field notes, which included "close, detailed reports of interaction" and "records of actual words, phrases or dialogue" (Emerson et al., 1995, pp. 14, 32), notes from informal interviews, documents, media articles and public profiles on social media. I then analyzed these for key empirical themes related to "user representation," and further analyzed these themes against keywords from the Shadow Committee's web page and other policy documents (such as "users," "representation," "experience") to discover how they corresponded to the ideas and experiences of drug user representation in Norway. Participation in the study was based on an informed consent procedures approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Persons included in this analysis are anonymized unless I refer to the publicly available material authored by the organization or other public figures, such as newspapers articles or organizations' webpages.

User Representatives in Drug Policy Reform and the Reactions

When the minister announced the members of the inquiry commission, the two user representatives did not have to wait long for reactions from the "affected community." One of my interlocutors defined a

representative as “not a real addict” who “never live(d) with a drug control regime imprinted on his body.” Others described him in more negative terms as an opportunist who capitalized on his—according to them—brief experience with illegal drugs. Some called him a “careerist” trapped in system thinking (and therefore attractive to the authorities), and they emphasized the dangers of professionalization of user representatives and of becoming a professional user or, as termed in literature, an entrepreneurial subject (Andreassen, 2009; Kojan et al., 2018). In other words, reactions toward this representative illustrated the ongoing competition on the “market of user representation” (Kojan et al., 2018, p. 94) penetrated by the cultural longing of authenticity (see Fillitz & Saris, 2013) both on the individual and collective levels. The protests actualized the recurrent conflicts among Norwegian organizations, currently more than 10, regarding each other’s authenticity claims: Who can call themselves “a drug user” or “a real addict” and, therefore, whose experience provides legitimate credentials to represent others (e.g. Johansen, 2017).

The controversial representative, Kenneth, was a leading figure in a user organization, *RIO—en landsdekkende brukerorganisasjon på rusfeltet* (*RIO—a Norwegian users’ association in field of alcohol and drugs*), which after my fieldwork changed the name from *Rusmisbrukernes Interesseeorganisasjon* (The Interest Organization for Substance Misusers) (RiO, 2021). Although the health minister ensured that representatives on the commission did not represent affiliated organizations, the inevitable reactions toward Kenneth’s appointment were undoubtedly related to his role in RiO, which has been criticized for failing to involve current users of illegal drugs and for “fake representation” (Sal, 2015). In the aftermath of one of the heated debates among the organizations, Anders Solli Sal (2015) wrote, “Unlike other user organizations, RiO is not democratic. It is not open to members. Rather, the board and leader nominate their own members among people [who] seem to match the spirit of the organization, which is freedom from intoxication.” Indeed, RiO does not have a member list, and thus, the number who support and identify with the organization is unknown. Despite this, RiO receives substantial governmental financial support and is a significant, very active participant in mainstream drug and addiction politics.

In other words, the critique of Kenneth was based both on his publicly known background and experience with drugs (or lack of it, his experience being “too old” and therefore irrelevant) and his role in a controversial organization. Although other reasons also could have been at play—jealousy, personal conflicts, financial interests or organizational power relations, I focus solely on how dissatisfaction with Kenneth was communicated in public and the arguments voiced against him regarding his “drug use experience.”

The second user representative, who came from MARBORG (Marborg, 2021), a user organization representing persons in opioid substitution treatment in Northern Norway, remained more anonymous and did not draw such a massive negative reaction. Some of my interlocutors voiced concerns about her communication skills and that she was “a convert promoting the image of drug users as hopeless, lost and in need for taking better choices,” as one formulated; however, most attention seemed to be focused on Kenneth.

Despite various criticism, representatives and their organizations were clearly authorized by politicians and the official system of support, broadly speaking, which included service on councils and committees that lay the foundations for political and clinical decisions. In the context of the Drug Policy Reform, the assumption, too, was that they were appropriate representatives. However, they faced difficulties from many who did not identify with the representatives’ experiences, nor agree with their political agenda. Clearly, these two representatives were not authorized by individual users whom they were meant to represent.

After the announcement of the commission’s composition, a group of people with diverse experiences with drugs and drug activism formed a loose, informal network called *Brukerstemmene på rusfeltet* (the Drug User Voices). To signal dissatisfaction with those selected for Minister Høie’s commission, they organized a concert in the Oslo centrum with a slogan that user organizations have

applied globally (e.g. Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network et al., 2008; Jürgens, 2005) which is borrowed from disability rights activism: “Nothing about us without us.” The network’s web page used moral language to shame the minister for his choices (Brukerstemma, 2019). In a piece entitled “Betrayal of the Users” in *Dagbladet*, a popular newspaper, they wrote: “It is a shame that users of illicit drugs are not represented in the commission” (Haugsgjerd et al., 2018). They were concerned not only about the persons who were selected to represent them, but also that representation alone did not guarantee that their voices would be considered in drafting the reform. They argued simultaneously for a wider mandate for the commission (legalization, not only decriminalization) and for including current—not former—users and profiled liberal activists. Importantly, many acknowledged the current representatives’ contributions and dropped their desire to remove them; instead, they requested the commission be expanded to include “real voices” or “more voices.”

The health minister responded in *Dagbladet* that users already had two representatives with different user backgrounds, which drew even stronger reactions. For instance, one of the protesters, wrote in another newspaper that the minister’s response was “a bit arrogant. A bit of respect for us to whom it applies would be nice.” He asked: “How can this commission benefit us when nobody in the commission knows where the shoe pinches?” (Asgari, 2018). Here, he clearly aligned himself with scholars who emphasize the danger of selecting potential representatives “to exclude the most marginalized users, who lack the means of influence” (Kojan et al., 2018, p. 97). Asgari initiated a petition campaign, collecting 854 signatures, a significant number in the Norwegian context (Opprop.net, 2018); however, the protesters did not succeed.

Shadowing the Shadow Committee—Different but Same

Outraged by the minister’s choices, persons related to the Drug User Voices established an alternative organization, the Shadow Committee (*Skyggeutvalget*). Ironically, the idea for the organization came from a “non-user” (understood here as a person not associated with any user organization or publicly identifying themselves in the reductive terms as “person using drugs”), an associate professor of criminology who half-jokingly proposed such an initiative on Facebook. His spontaneous idea attracted much engagement, and the committee was born. The original vision was to deliver an alternative proposal for a “knowledge-based drug policy reform,” shaped by “the voices of the users” and “not polluted by political compromises.” The organization’s web page reads:

The committee primarily has a user profile that seeks broad collaboration with organizations and professionals, in addition to other users. All user organizations in addition to the Association for Safer Drug Policies (*Foreningen Tryggere Ruspolitikk*) have been invited to cooperate. Among the members of the committee there are members of different user organizations and independent users. Members participate as private persons (. . .) The desire is a pervasive reform that breaks with the criminal regime of the last 50 years. The Shadow Committee takes on the task that the [formal] committee did not take. Our goal is to shape tomorrow’s policy as we think it should be. First and foremost, we will base our work on user experiences and another knowledge and ensure that user voices are heard and emphasized. (Skyggeutvalget, 2019)

Thirteen persons came to the first meeting organized in the office of the progressive harm reduction organization, FHN, Association for Human Drug Policies (Forening for human narkotikapolitikk, 2021). Active or former members of FHN, MARBORG, RiO, and national organizations for patients in opioid substitution treatment ProLAR and LARnett, as well as not associated users and family members participated.

To begin with, the Shadow Committee invited “*everyone* interested in a *real* drug policy change” (Skyggeutvalget, 2019; my emphasis) to join their action. However, no organizations with roots in the

temperance movement responded to the invitation, which, according to conversations among the members, was “for the better.” The initiators and members of the committee seemed to be ideologically united in their preference for legalization and harm reduction as well as criticism of an abstinence-oriented approach toward drug use and related problems. The first selection of members was straightforward and speedy. For any organization and social movement, shared goals are essential and a key element is to omit perspectives that may hinder the desired social or political change (e.g. Johnston, 2014; Snow & Soule, 2009). In this regard, the committee’s rhetoric of representation was paradoxical because no organization can represent “all” users and have the same goals at the same time. Therefore, from the beginning of its mobilization, the committee committed the same “sin” of which they accused the minister—the ideological premise: Every user voice is needed, unless it speaks different views.

Soon, more multifaceted processes began to unfold within the committee which disclosed disagreements and put internal understandings of representation at stake. In light of its ambitions and goals, the committee, too, was caught in the conflicting landscape of representation, as its members contested the genuineness of “the user voice.” To begin with, the rhetoric the committee’s leader used to communicate its goals sowed doubts among some members.

In an op-ed, in which the committee announced their aims, the committee presented itself as “an impatient group of people who in many ways have experienced the various drug *problems*” and which “will remind the Minister of what life looks like for those who feel the shadow side of the drug policy on their bodies (. . .) It is those of us who have worn the shoe who know where it pinches. It has always been that way!” (Johansen et al., 2018; my emphasis). In an interview, committee members were described as “today’s *voiceless*, those of the users who have no other platforms to speak from” (Renland, 2018, my emphasis).

One of the attendees at the Drug User Voices’ concert in Oslo, a man in his 30s who used cannabis from time to time, commented:

Why do they call it drug problems? I mean, why do they focus on problems? My drug use is not a problem, that is the whole problem [laughing]. I mean, with the drug policy. If the committee really wants to change anything, they cannot keep talking only about this group [person with problematic illegal drug use].

This framing, however, appealed to others who have lived with stigma, rights deprivation and lack of recognition. They felt acknowledged and clearly seduced by this rhetoric. As one of the members said:

When I heard [the leader of the committee] during the concert, I thought: “Hell, yeah! Today is the day!” Now I will contribute, we will write this report together. Does Høie [the minister] think that we cannot write?! I can contribute even if I live here [pointing to the ground/street]. They will hear us, oh yes, they will, big time.

His friend seconded: “Yes, we are the voices without a voice [laughing], they will hear from us, yes.” Both were eager to join the Shadow Committee, and those who initiated the committee’s first meeting had explicitly expressed their wish to include “active users,” stereotypical “voiceless addicts,” stigmatized “junkies” addicted to illegal heroin, living in bad conditions or on the street, misunderstood and never respected, with “problems.” One or two of them attended the first meetings; however, their attendance decreased quite quickly because of their living conditions and the challenges they faced. None of the “heroin users from the street” showed up at the meetings.

After another meeting, a few reacted to the language the more educated members used, which they experienced as alienating. One person commented, “It’s the same as usual. They talk, we die,” referring to a slogan from a user-initiated action during policy and other formal meetings that harm reduction activists used globally as a response to the passivity of these gatherings and the slow

progress. Another said, “I don’t understand those words, I don’t understand what they are talking about. This is too difficult for me.” Feeling that the organization did not represent their ways of being and talking, they left. In a few weeks, the group had shrunk to those with far different realities and characteristics than the “disempowered street addict” and “those who live in the shadows” whom the committee had sought to represent.

At the same time, paradoxically, the organization seemed to be surrounded by more and more tragedy narratives. In particular, the participants reacted to the metaphors—“shabby clothes, messy hair and worn-out shoes” (Johansen et al., 2018, my emphasis)—they used in the newspaper piece, even if they all had agreed on sending this piece on their behalf in the first place. A few members of the group started to express that they did not recognize themselves in this depiction. One said, “I’m so fed up [with] the worn-out shoes thing. I do not want to be represented this way. Only misery and dirty clothes. Come on, I mean, this is so 90s.” Not identifying with the disempowered voices that, according to them, the committee promoted, they looked critically at their own positionality, representativeness and thus, accountability. Another said, “Actually, our experiences expired too, to be honest,” indicating that they no longer could be said to represent “those who live in the shadows,” which had been an element in their critique of the health minister’s choices. Eventually, they did not feel they represented anyone but themselves, and they stated that the committee spoke in a way that they did not want to present to others. Clearly, this political project also had become a question of identity, belonging and self-presentation.

Members disagreed on methods, too, and found themselves in an epistemological conflict. Some wanted to base the policy proposal on “user stories,” which is a dominant frame for presenting the “subjugated knowledge” or “bringing voices to bear” in the policy contexts (Madden et al., 2021, p. 6). Others deemed this framing as “whining” and “social pornography” that “we [have] already heard enough and nobody will take seriously.” They suggested basing the proposal on available scientific knowledge, but they would be the ones to define the questions and prioritize the types of knowledge and research suitable to find the answers. To them, “the user voice” meant a perspective for the analytical work, not a collection of individual stories. Some members were realistic and wanted the policy proposal to account for what was politically possible; others considered that approach too strategic and corrupt—“not what a user voice is about.” With all the disagreements, engagement waned, and the group almost dissolved. At the last meeting that I attended, the handful of members remaining concluded that the planned report to the minister would have a significantly limited scope compared with the plans. One stated with a tone of capitulation, “It did not end up as I imagined.”

Rather than discuss who stayed and who left, and what dynamics influenced the outcome (for discussion on the vulnerability of drug user organizations see for instance Frank et al., 2012, p. 469), I use elements of this case to examine the emerging problem of representation in drug activism mobilization in Scandinavia as new associations and organizations are continuously being established. For instance, while revising this article, yet another organization was established, an umbrella organization called Preventio, which unites progressive organizations working on drug policy and which support the Drug Policy Reform. There are currently nine member organizations in Preventio, including RiO, Association for Safer Drug Policy and Law Enforcement Action Partnership Scandinavia.

Drug User Representatives and Political Representation

According to Pitkin (1967), the disagreements about what representatives ought to be doing are aggravated by differing views of representation or misapplied standards of representation. Empirical and analytical interpretations of a given social role often can conflict because it is unclear whose concept of a qualified representative applies, and the context for that concept is missing. As I have described, this happened in the Norwegian case, as the terms “representation” and “user voice” had multiple meanings and usages. I argue that this interpretative diversity laid the ground for a conflict

situation. To reconcile such disagreements, stakeholders could clarify which view of representation they invoke (i.e. the social role that representatives accommodate and the meanings the represented attach to this role). Such a clarification would contribute to a better understanding of the protesters and other stakeholders' expectations and disappointments and facilitate a more systematic dialogue on "drug user voices" in particular and "user participation" in general.

Descriptive Representation and Experiential "Enoughness"

In the context of the Norwegian Drug Policy Reform, tension among descriptive, substantive and symbolic views of representation (Pitkin, 1967) laid the foundation for discontent and the mobilization of the Shadow Committee, as well as its disintegration. According to the protesters, the minister's choices were based on descriptive representation, an interpretation that mobilized them to action. As defined by Pitkin (1967), this view is that representatives represent not only their constituents' expressed preferences, but also, *if not primarily*, the politically relevant descriptive characteristics of their constituents, which in this context was drug use. Thus, the question becomes "Does the representative share certain experiences with the drug users?" The protesters agreed that both selected representatives shared "some of their" experience; however, they reacted to the publicly expressed standard for evaluating the representatives, which was the accuracy of the *resemblance* between the representative and "the drug users." As one Shadow Committee member said, "Because they used some drugs at some point and made it [their use] public doesn't make it *enough* [to represent us]." According to the protesters, the reliance on descriptive representation of "drug users" assigned less importance to what the representatives did or stood for. They also believed that the minister did not consider the differences between forms of drug use, experiences and opinions. At the same time, it can be argued that precisely what the representative stood for was significant. As the highly profiled drug activist, Arild Knutsen, commented during a public meeting: "It would not make sense to have me in the working group because I am for legalization, so my political stand is not in accordance with mandate." However, in this article, I focus on the protesters' logics as formulated in their arguments, not on the minister's choices or the logics of political authorization of the representatives (for discussion on the factors, which contribute to gain political legitimacy see for example Frank et al., 2012).

In Pitkin's (1967) understanding, descriptive representation opposes accountability because the *who* is more essential than the *what*. This distinction is central to discussions about identity politics and questions concerning representation of marginalized groups. Scholars and activists have provided arguments in favor of such representation (e.g. Guldvik et al., 2013; Pantoja & Segura, 2003); however, with the current political, clinical and scholarly adoration of the "user voice" in Norway, we must ask not if, but whose voice is heard through descriptive representatives, which is the favored means to provide institutional involvement of "users" in Norwegian social and health care arenas (e.g. Kojan et al., 2018; Backe-Hansen, 2001).

A political and social imagination which contains a kind of big "user-me" drives drug and addiction field. First, this imaginary involves the idea that experiences *can* be represented. Second, this idea homogenizes and reduces all drug users to a single "I-the user," who experiences, interprets and evaluates in the same way. This wide acceptance of *one* "drug user representative" may be grounded in the popular imaginary and perception of illicit drugs as one uniform category and users as a homogenous population (Alexander 2008; Davies 1997; Lancaster et al., 2017). At the same time, like other activist and interest groups based on collective identities (e.g. Bartoszko et al., 2012), drug user organizations, including the Shadow Committee, portray themselves as "I-the user" and paradoxically reproduce the reductive idea of "groupness" which they oppose. Institutional actors, such as clinics, higher education institutions or policy committees welcome this "imagined sameness" (Gullestad, 2002) because it is simpler to manage, *even if* omissions are made and individual differences are eliminated. This established key element of every representation (Pitkin, 1967) is often

ignored in the discourse or narratives of “user involvement” in these contexts (e.g. Fraser et al., 2016; Lancaster et al., 2017; Madden et al, 2021), and the question remains: How well can a representative accommodate experiential diversity?

Supporters may argue that descriptive representation denotes “shared experiences” (e.g. drug use, criminalization, treatment experiences) rather than only visible characteristics (e.g. drug use), which avoid the essentialist trap. As Phillips (1995) and Mansbridge (1999, 2003) noted in their work on women’s representation, “shared experiences” enable the representatives to act for others because they share “the outward signs” of having lived through the same experiences, if not the identical ones. This gives the representatives “communicative and informational advantages” and enables them to “forge bonds of trust” (Mansbridge, 1999, p. 641) with the drug users they represent. One can argue, therefore, that descriptive and substantive representation, which Pitkin (1967, p. 11) defined as “acting in the interests of the represented in a manner responsive to them,” cannot be separated because drug users have “groupness,” which they actively reproduce through political engagement. However, the protesters’ reactions both confirm and reject such an approach, illustrating the limitations of “the outward signs” and “shared experiences.” Who decides if shared experiences are shared enough? The protesters expected that their representatives would posit *experiential enoughness*, an undefined, yet expected characteristic of a qualified representative. That Kenneth was not “drug user enough,” “junkie enough” or “didn’t have enough drug experience” was crucial to the protesters’ dissatisfaction. This concept of “enoughness” is a critical point for further discussion of the increasing trend among Norwegian social and health care institutions to hire “experience consultants” (*erfaringskonsulenter*).

The Ambiguous Representation

The mixed reactions to the choice of representatives was based partly on the protesters’ faith in representation, which Pitkin classifies as symbolic. This view of representation considers the ways that a representative “stands for” the represented—that is, the meaning that a representative has for those represented (Pitkin, 1967). In this understanding, the representation itself of those who use drugs has political and symbolic significance. Historically, drug policy has been designed and executed by those without drug experience (explicit or made public), and therefore, having “user representatives” was considered a sign of progression and democratic inclusion. Symbolic representation suggests that the very presence of someone from the given group can have transformative effects on the public, and thus, change perceptions about that group and its role in the social and political arenas.

As with descriptive representation, symbolic representatives may not advocate for the same solutions as those the represented desire, but rather place particular problem areas on the agenda. In this reading, symbolic representation is similar to Urbinatti’s (2000) understanding of representation as advocacy: The point of representation is not the aggregation of interests, but the preservation of disagreements necessary to preserve liberty.

However, symbolic representation emphasizes, indeed, the symbolic aspect, and symbols are ambiguous because they “store” different meanings and represent different things to different people (Douglas, 1966; Turner, 1967). Their effects on others are not given and often can have unintended outcomes. If I ask, rephrasing Pitkin’s (1967) assessment question for this type of representation, “What kind of response was invoked in those represented by the representatives the minister chose?” the response is clearly ambiguous. On the one hand, those engaged in the protests appreciated the minister’s effort to include “drug user voices” in the reform. On the other hand, they did not accept the choice of the particular individuals. The critics’ arguments showcased this particular problem of symbolic representation. To the protesters, the representatives simultaneously symbolized inclusion and exclusion from the reform process. The critics drew upon idiosyncratic experiences and collective logics of representation to interpret the role and meaning of the representatives, all of which was conflicting.

These ambiguous reactions, as well as the committee's breakup, also illustrate that the representatives may "stand for" the people they represent as long as those people believe in or accept them as their representatives. As the empirical material shows, this acceptance depends on either descriptive or substantive characteristics. To a great extent, the conflicts within the Shadow Committee related to substantive representation, the view that representatives—independent of their characteristics—serve the interests of their constituency, as their substitute (Pitkin, 1967). This view of representation may be criticized for depriving the represented their agency and risk, for instance, that persons who use drugs are not present in the public. However, my material shows that Shadow Committee members applied and even promoted this understanding, too, despite the original critique that the formal representatives lacked descriptive characteristics. The degree of acceptance among the represented is what matters, which explains why a "non-user" could become a leader of the Shadow Committee in the first place. He did not share the descriptive characteristics of the represented, but he clearly shared their goals and opinions and was believed to have the capacity to advance and promote the policy outcomes they sought.

On the other hand, the formal representatives on the minister's committee, despite their descriptive and symbolic values and advantages, did not have the "bond of trust" that Mansbridge (1999) claimed comes from "shared experiences." To be accepted as a qualified representative in the inquiry commission on new drug policy required such a bond. In this context, too, the Shadow Committee members became caught in conflicting expectations and paradoxical acts of acceptance or rejection. This ambiguity seems to be an inevitable part of user organizations, because being represented involves relinquishing control over self-presentation (e.g. Frank et al., 2012; Madden et al., 2021).

"We Want It All"—Political or Social Representation?

Feminist studies, in which the question of representation has long been central, can inform discussions of "drug user voices." The main argument for the political presence of women (or in this context, persons who use drugs) is that women (or persons who use drugs) are more likely to act for women (or persons who use drugs) than those who are not women (or do not use drugs). However, as Sarah Childs (2008, p. xxvi) commented: "This claim, especially when crudely portrayed, seems to be both reductive and essentialist in that it assumes that the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation is straightforward." Representatives and the represented *may* be similar in some instances, but their interests also may diverge due to a multiplicity of overlapping characteristics among persons who use drugs, between those who use and those who do not, and between other social categories, such as class, ethnicity, experiences, and political preferences, not to mention the goals, desires and ideologies that may have wielded influence during their "treatments," meetings with care institutions or punishment.

Therefore, homogeneity within the group cannot be accepted at face value, and the protesters explicitly challenged such an assumption. We can doubt whether such a diverse group as "drug users" will act entirely for their fellow "drug users" when chosen as representatives based on their nature and experiences, in the same manner that critical feminist scholars question women's representation. Phillips (1995, p. 53) acknowledged that there is no empirical or theoretical plausibility to the idea that women share all (or, again, enough) experiences or that women's shared experiences translate into shared beliefs or goals. Neither does she consider it likely that women will organize themselves into a group with group opinions and goals that can be represented. Therefore, it is tempting to challenge scholars, politicians and drug activists who hold that "user representatives" *always* act for other persons using drugs, notwithstanding their differences.

Despite the differences between the various modes of representation, my study illustrates that there is no clear-cut line between these, and none entirely satisfied the protesters. They wanted the representatives to be descriptive, substantive and symbolic all at once and none of those. Is it possible to reconcile these wishes and the simultaneous need for various representative

characteristics? The protesters expressed that the presence of just any drug user would not do, because that person may not see himself as part of or as having obligations to the group. They demanded representatives who experienced and expressed a sense of belonging to the group of drug users and with a strong mutual relationship with the group—those that Dovi (2002, pp. 729–734) termed “preferable descriptive representatives” in her work on female representation. This type of representative shares aims with users; that is, they want to see drug users’ “social, economic and political status improved” and also experiences a “reciprocated sense of having their fate linked with [persons who use drugs]” (Dovi, 2002, p. 736).

In her book, *The Politics of Presence*, Phillips (1995) contrasted two distinct modes of politics, a “politics of presence” and “a politics of ideas,” which are necessary and overlapping. The first mode corresponds to the more formalistic models of representation in which decision makers aggregate and transmit constituents’ interests. By contrast, the second mode emphasizes identity. Beyond the transmission of interests is the broader symbolic presence of a group member who shares those interests, and thus garners recognition and respect for the group. This resonates with Piktin’s (1967) definition of symbolic representation; however, Phillips (1995) emphasized that interests cannot be fully separated from those who share them. As we witnessed in the Norwegian mobilization, actions were only part of the assessment. The two representatives on the inquiry commission did not even get a chance to act or voice their beliefs before the critics exploded. The *who* was as significant and even overshadowed what the representatives stood for and would achieve in this position.

Although descriptive political representation has the potential to represent identities and generate a conception of social representation (Squires, 1999) that posits symbolic qualities, social symbolic representation is not less problematic. As already noted, symbolic representation may empower and disempower those who are represented. Further, the Shadow Committee illustrated that “drug use” as a social marker to identify people shaping a politically significant identity group served both to unite people with one another and galvanize them into action. The identity groups are politically significant because they shape people’s needs, interests and interactions with the state. However, in the case of the Shadow Committee and the identity project it became, social representation also can split a “group” and hinder political progress. Thus, Phillips (1995) proposed reconciliation of demands, illustrated by the Shadow Committee’s mobilization to endorse a mix of the two modes of politics. She noted, “It is in the relationship between ideas and presence that we can best hope to find a fairer system of representation, not in a false opposition between one and the other” (p. 25).

Conclusion

Besides illustrating the longing for authenticity expressed in the questions “who is ‘the real drug user’ and whose experiences are ‘real’ drug experiences,” the case of the Shadow Committee showcases that representation appears to be contingent on existing political practices. Clearly, the members’ understandings were inextricably shaped by the way Norwegian citizens are currently represented. In democratic societies, citizens associate and convey authorization through actively voting according to their preferences, interests and opinions. The changing realities with complex decisive processes and multiple locations of political power challenge this vision by including representatives selected with much less transparency. Domestic and global transformations reveal a need to update these understandings. Associational life—social movements, interest groups and civic associations—are increasingly recognized as important for the survival of representative democracies (Dovi, 2007, 2018). Non-elective representatives’ claims *are* important: They express the power of the state in a disaggregated manner. And while “drug users” become increasingly involved in decision making, they also require more democratic practices of involvement.

In the polarized landscape of drug policy, drug activism, and addiction treatment, it is urgent to rethink the concept of “user representation” which politicians, clinicians, and often users themselves

uncritically engage and take for granted (see also Dovi 2002; Madden et al., 2021). In the increasing search for both individual and collective authenticity, the question of quality representation seems to be a utopic project of our times. Actors trying to challenge contemporary realities within drug policy, must reflect on these processes because, as Mansbridge (2003) noted, normative understandings of representation do not hold to the recent empirical research and contemporary democratic practices. I argue that this goes another way around, too. While recognizing the vital role of consumer participation in drug policy, I suggest reconsidering the governing assumptions regarding “user representatives” because descriptive representations are no longer satisfactory as consumers of illicit drugs increasingly emphasize diversity within the group. We need to question who determines the interests of the represented and to which of the many competing interests representatives should respond and how.

However, assessments about representatives will always depend on the issue at hand and the political, social and moral atmosphere in which the representatives act. As Piktin (1967) concluded, “To understand the multiple and conflicting standards within the concept of representation is to reveal the futility of holding all representatives to some fixed set of guidelines” (in Dovi 2018). The Norwegian case illustrates that standards for evaluating representatives defy generalizations. Individuals, especially democratic citizens, are likely to disagree deeply about what representatives should be doing. Therefore, policy makers, clinicians, and scholars must consider which vision and understanding of political representation should inform drug policy involvement.


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Note

1. In this article, I use terms applied by the persons and organizations I studied, translated from Norwegian to English: “user representative” (*brukerrepresentant*), “drug user” (*rusbruker/stoffbruker*), “addict” (*rusmisbruker/narkoman/junkie*). A detailed discussion of terms and categories used to describe persons who use (illegal) substances are beyond the scope of this article. In contrast to Madden and colleagues (2021, p. 2), I do not use quotations marks to signal contingency and the “troubling” of the concept, but rather to indicate that I refer to the emic/empirical concepts used in the field and by my interlocutors.

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