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Three strategies of user participation. Interest organisation representatives' views on how they make an impact on service development

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores user participation in interest organizations that represent people in vulnerable life situations and addresses the following research question: *How do interest organizations seek to influence public actors, and what are the perceived impacts?* Data collection was conducted through qualitative semi-structured interviews. We interviewed 14 representatives from 8 different interest organizations in Norway. Limitations included the fact that there were few informants from each organization and only three with personal service user experience. In the thematic analysis, we developed three themes related to how the informants described their organizations' dealings with services, municipalities, politicians and other public actors. The cooperative strategy refers to participation as an arena for collaboration and partnership in which they assumedly would share interests and goals. The oppositional strategy shows how the informants would use open conflict and confrontation as tools for influence, often through the media and complaint systems. The third strategy, negotiation, illustrates how organizations would manoeuvre between being critical and constructive while maintaining relationships with public actors. Interest organizations seem to manoeuvre between these strategies, but they may prefer different strategies depending on their goals and relationships with public actors. Even though all could contribute to service development, the informants expressed that it was easiest to identify impacts from cooperative and oppositional strategies. To improve user participation by interest organizations, increased attention should be given to the interaction and power dynamics among the stakeholders. Moreover, increased attention should be given to the impact of these processes.

Introduction

This paper explores user participation in interest organizations representing people in vulnerable life situations by focusing on strategies and impacts. User participation is about involving service users in developing the welfare services that affect them (White Paper 2015–2016), which can occur at service, system and political levels (White Paper 38 2020–2021). The goal of user participation is to democratize and improve welfare services, transfer power to service users and increase service user satisfaction (Askheim et al. 2017; Beresford 2012; Vedung and Dahlberg 2013). User

participation can be directly or indirectly related to the decision-making process (Tritter 2009), and service users might have different degrees of power in these processes (Arnstein 1969).

To promote user participation, organizations representing service users are vital actors in developing welfare services and providing input to government policy (Norwegian Official Report 2018; United Nations 2006). These organizations often consist of people with service user experience, next of kin, idealists and professionals. However, some groups of service users may experience particular vulnerability (Peroni and Timmer 2013) and need help promoting their voices (United Nations 2006). In a Nordic context, authors have described people with dementia, intellectual disabilities, mental health problems, substance use issues, asylum seekers and children as groups of people in particularly vulnerable situations (Fjetland Gjermestad and Lid 2022; Frank Anker and Tammi 2012; Kuran et al. 2020), highlighting that it is a combination of individual factors and social structures that influence people's degree of vulnerability. This might affect people's ability to participate in organizations, and organizations representing service users could often be more *for* than *of* people with service user experience (Gathen Slettebø and Skjeggestad 2023; Schicktanz et al. 2018). Thus, interest organizations may face challenges concerning representativeness since relatives and people with professional backgrounds are often the formal representatives (Fischer and Van de Bovenkam, 2019; Gerhards Jongsma and Schicktanz 2017; Raz et al. 2018; Rojatz Fischer and Van de Bovenkam, 2018; Weetch O'Dwyer and Clare 2021). To reflect this variation in the backgrounds of members and representatives, we apply the term interest organization rather than service user organization in this text.

Interest organizations differ regarding organizational structures, members, ideologies and goals (Markström and Karlsson 2013). Interest organizations in Norway are mainly concerned with influencing the development of public services, but some also provide their own services. Furthermore, Norwegian interest organizations usually have democratic structures (e.g. general assemblies) and receive much of their funding from the government. Research shows how government support can be perceived as necessary for developing interest organizations and increasing their influence (Billsten and Benderix 2021). Researchers also suggest that interest organizations are professionalizing themselves and that their representatives have developed a closer relationship with public actors than before (Andreassen Breit and Legard 2014; Meyer and Bromley 2013; Näslund Sjostrom and Markstrom 2020). Thus, interest organizations are becoming more strategic and increasingly seek influence through formal user participation channels (e.g. councils or committees) and direct contact with public actors (Mellquist 2022a, 2022b) Eriksson (2015, 2018) describes how this close relationship might lead to co-option and interest organizations adopting professional logic, attitudes and values as their own. Interest organizations must, therefore, balance maintaining a critical role while ensuring a collaborative relationship with public stakeholders (Jones Jallinoja and Pietilä 2021). As such, interest organizations increasingly try to optimize their opportunities to make an impact on service development (Näslund Sjostrom and Markstrom 2018).

A central aspect of this study is how the members of interest organizations view the impact of their work on service development. However, impact is a charged concept and is often perceived as linear. Since user participation occurs in the social world, which is an open system (Danermark Ekström and Karlsson 2019), it is useful to address impact through a circular understanding that focuses on both process and outcomes (Banks Herrington and Carter 2017). Banks Herrington and Carter (2017) describe three levels of impact: impact for involved stakeholders (participatory impact); the use of findings from the participatory process (collaborative impact); and changes on the societal level (collective impact). These levels have also been identified in the research literature, where studies indicate that user participation can empower those involved, affect professionals' attitudes and knowledge, contribute to organizational development, improve service delivery, change professional practice and affect policies (Gathen Slettebø and Skjeggestad 2022; Mockford et al. 2012; Olsson et al. 2020; Rosenberg and Hillborg 2016). However, studies also suggest that user participation could harm the involved service users, lack impact and be challenging to evaluate (Daykin et al. 2007; Gathen Slettebø and Skjeggestad 2022; Ocloo and Matthews

2016; Usher and Denis 2022). Furthermore, research evaluating interest organizations' participation in health policy has mainly been descriptive, focusing on stakeholders' perceptions of the degree of participation and its form (Souliotis Agapidaki et al. 2018, Souliotis Peppou et al. 2018).

To understand how interest organizations work and the strategies they apply, insider and outsider perspectives are useful. Binderkrantz (2005) describes how interest organizations can use insider and outsider positions to gain influence by connecting these to the use of direct or indirect channels. In an insider position, interest organizations use direct channels, which include administrative and parliamentary methods. Activities within these channels include lobbying, providing feedback to services and public hearings and participating in councils and committees. Insider positions are often considered the most favourable and effective (Mankell and Fredriksson 2020, 2021; Mellquist 2022a, 2022b) since proximity to decision-makers enables interest organizations to participate in formal participation channels and interact with them in informal settings (A. Binderkrantz Christiansen and Pedersen 2015). However, an outsider position can allow interest organizations to be more critical and obtain their goals by means other than direct contact with public actors (Binderkrantz 2008). Binderkrantz (2005) found that interest organizations in an outsider position use indirect channels, which mainly consist of different types of mobilization and media use. Mobilizations include arranging public meetings, conferences, petitions and demonstrations, while media use focuses on contacting the media, issuing press releases, holding conferences and publishing analyses and reports. In this way, insiders and outsiders can be seen as distinct yet complementary strategies for influencing public services.

Despite a growing body of research literature, there is still a need for knowledge about interest organizations' interaction with public actors and the impact of their work. Therefore, this study aims to develop knowledge about user participation by interest organizations for people in vulnerable situations through interviews with representatives of interest organizations. We address the following research question: *How do interest organizations seek to influence public actors, and what are the perceived impacts?*

Materials and Methods

Design

We chose a qualitative design for this study. A qualitative approach focuses on obtaining in-depth knowledge about a phenomenon (Creswell and Creswell 2018), which is appropriate when the purpose is to investigate the participants' experiences, values and thoughts (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). The study was carried out in line with a critical realist approach. Critical realism's central position is that reality exists and, thus, actors and social structures exist, but we only have access to knowledge about this reality through interpretation (Danermark Ekström and Karlsson 2019). Hence, the researchers' interpretations, choices and values have played a major role in conducting the study.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection method. This method focuses on conducting an in-depth enquiry about the topics from the interview guide, while still allowing exploration of topics that emerge in the conversations and what the informants see as important (Brinkmann 2014; Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). In the present study, we wanted a broad perspective on user participation by interest organizations for people in vulnerable situations. We recruited informants from eight different interest organizations. These service user groups included people with dementia, intellectual disabilities, and substance use problems, as well as those in contact with child protection services, children of parents with substance use problems, and asylum seekers. Common among these interest organizations is that they represent people who often have challenges in promoting their voices and thus may be under-represented in service development (Norwegian Official Report 2018).

Recruitment and Informants

The first author contacted different interest organizations by email, informing them of the study's aim and asking them to help recruit informants with different backgrounds and roles in their organizations. A person in the central organization was interviewed first and asked about other potential informants in their organization. The informants were either employees or volunteers and were professionals, next of kin, service users or individuals with a combination of these backgrounds. The final sample consisted of 14 people between the ages of 20 and 75 (see Table 1 for the characteristics of the informants). The differences among the informants regarding age, role and background were often connected to the type of organization they represented. The informants represented eight organizations that varied in size and structure. Most organizations worked both regionally and nationally, while some either worked on a national or a regional level. Members of the organizations ranged from around thirty to many thousand, most somewhere in the middle. All organizations except one had employees, mainly between 3 and 15. Recruitment concluded when we deemed that the material had sufficient informative power to answer the research questions (cf. Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora 2016).

Data collection

The first author conducted interviews between August 2019 and October 2020 in Norway. Twelve interviews were individual, and one had two informants after a request from the organization. Eleven of the interviews were conducted physically. The last two individual interviews were conducted over the telephone due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews lasted between 65 and 100 minutes each and followed an interview guide. The initial interview guide was developed with input from the researchers in the overarching research project. During the first couple of interviews, the interview guide was changed based on new insights from the interviews and feedback from the informants. The final interview guide consisted of questions about the organization, the informant's role, their experiences with user participation, how to identify impacts of the organizations' work, and potential downsides of user participation.

Data analysis

We followed Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) framework for thematic analysis in analysing the data after the first author had transcribed the interviews. The analysis used an abductive approach, and theory was applied in interpreting the material (Arnstein 1969; BinderkrantzBinderkrantz 2005, 2008; Binderkrantz Christiansen and Pedersen 2015; Tritter 2009).

Table 1. Characteristics of Informants.

Characteristics	Subgroups	Number of individuals
Gender	Female	10
	Male	4
Role	Employee	8
	Volunteer	6
Age	20–39	5
	40-59	7
	60+	2
Representing	People with dementia	3
	People with substance use problems	2
	Asylum seekers	2
	People with intellectual disabilities	3
	Children in contact with child welfare services	2
	Children of parents with substance use problems	2
Background	Personal service user experience	3
	Next of kin	2
	Professional education (law, health professions, sociology)	7
	Professional education/Next of kin	2

The first step in the analysis was to become familiar with the material by reading the transcriptions multiple times and noting initial ideas and things of interest. Then, the first author conducted coding across the whole data set. This coding included both semantic and latent codes (cf. Braun and Clarke 2013), but was mainly focused on labelling the semantic meaning of what the informants had said (e.g. the types of user participation channels they used and different impacts associated with their work). The next step was to search for initial themes, for which we received feedback from presenting our coding in various academic settings. In this phase, we developed a particular interest in both the process of participation and the impacts associated with this process. The development of initial themes therefore revolved around different channels, strategies and impacts described by the informants. We then reviewed the themes and checked whether they worked concerning the dataset and our codes. Then, we tried to develop a centralizing concept that embraced the themes. In this process, some themes were discarded while others were further developed, as we saw that they were more important than we had deemed before. During the development of coherent themes, we found that different types of strategies (cooperation, opposition and negotiation) worked well as centralizing concepts. Thus, the themes in the results include subthemes describing how the informants described interaction with public actors, their preferred channels of user participation, and the perceived impact of each strategy.

Ethics

The study was recommended by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (reference number 505,481). Before the interviews, the informants received information about the study by email from the first author. This information was repeated for the informants before the interviews. In addition, the informants were informed about the opportunity to withdraw from the study and that both they and their organization would be anonymized in the reports. After this, the informants gave their written consent to participate in the study. There were no informants who did not have formal consent competence.

Results

The informants described how they worked to influence public actors and the impact of their efforts. The analysis led to the development of three themes: a cooperative strategy, an oppositional strategy and a negotiation strategy. We found that these themes reflect three tendencies in how the informants described their interest organizations' interaction with public actors. Even though these strategies may have overlapped in practice, the interest organizations seemed to consciously manoeuvre between them, and some appeared to prefer specific strategies over others.

The cooperative strategy

Many informants spoke of using a cooperative strategy to impact service development. This strategy included operating as insiders and seemingly sharing goals with public actors. Many informants said they often chose this strategy at the service level and in municipalities, where the informants described having a good relationship with public actors. Many described similar or shared goals, which resulted in constructive dialogue in direct channels such as councils, committees, meetings and informal interaction with public actors. Additionally, the informants described that they and the public actors participated in each other's arrangements, collaborated in providing services and sometimes provided services financed by public actors.

The informants expressed that dialogue, trust and respect were vital for what they often labelled as collaboration or partnership. These factors were perceived as promoting mutual understanding, as well as goals and commitments, and thus improved relationships between stakeholders. For example, one informant talked of a local interest organization's relationship with the leaders in a nursing home.

> We think we got closer to each other through the moving process. We started the organisation and, in a way, got a proper cooperation forum. I feel that this changed a lot in the collaboration. Things were presented and informed about, and one could come up with views and input—concerning both what they had thought of and what they had not.
>
> John, organisation for people with dementia

This strategy was especially mentioned by those representing people with dementia, who expressed having mutually beneficial relationships with public actors. Many informants also said that public actors invited them to seminars and meetings to present their views and that public actors attended their meetings and arrangements. Furthermore, because many interest organizations had high status in their field among professionals, the informants described how they conducted lectures for professional actors (e.g. health professionals). In addition, professionals comprise a significant part of the member base of some of the organizations, leading to a closer connection to the public actors.

Many informants applied the cooperative strategy in the context of contributing to developing existing and new public services. For example, one informant described how a group of people with dementia visited public institutions with public actors to improve accessibility and usability. Many of the interest organizations represented also provided services, and most of the organizations received funding from the public. Moreover, some informants described how they delivered services financed by the government. For example, one described the importance of a service the organizations provided that was ordered and funded by the government and on which they collaborated with public actors.

> The assignment is to provide general information about the asylum process and prepare them for this process, especially for the asylum interview. The purpose is for the applicants to gain knowledge to inform their case in the best possible way and get a realistic picture of what it means to apply for asylum.
>
> Helene, organisation for asylum seekers

Identifying impacts from the cooperative strategy was often straightforward because the goal was to improve or develop concrete services. For example, some said that one way to identify impact was to find out whether a service had been delivered or not. Another was to see if the services better met the service user group's needs. Moreover, some informants claimed that they had started collaborating with the government in service provision and, in rare cases, the government had taken over the service provision permanently. One informant described how they provided a chat service that gave them unique expertise, resulting in the government inviting them to contribute to developing similar services for other service user groups. Furthermore, the informants expressed how the cooperative strategy contributed to the interest organizations obtaining better relationships with public actors, receiving more information, expanding their networks, being given access to new user participation channels and sometimes receiving more funding.

The informants described how the interest organizations operated as insiders in the cooperative strategy and stated that they and public actors often had similar goals. In addition, this strategy resulted in organizations developing services for their service user groups, either financed by or in collaboration with public services.

The oppositional strategy

When the informants talked about using an oppositional strategy, this included explicit criticism of public actors, mainly through outsider channels. Many informants described how their organizations could engage in open conflict with and exert pressure on public actors at the service, system and political levels. The informants mainly chose this strategy from outsider channels such as the media and through complaint systems.

The oppositional strategy often included conflict based on frustration towards public actors, services and policies. These experiences were especially present in interviews with informants

representing people with intellectual disabilities. A recurring theme in these interviews was how they fought for the provision of law-required services.

> Service user-controlled personal assistance allows for managing one's everyday life. However, the municipalities refuse to provide it. We have appeal after appeal. The minister has sent letters saying that they must comply with the regulations. However, they do not listen and know that it does not matter. If you breathe in the morning, it is good enough for the municipalities.
>
> Dina, organisation for people with intellectual disabilities

The informants spoke of outsider channels such as using the media, publishing reports, providing services to service users, using legal and other complaint systems and conducting petitions. The informants expressed that outsider channels were often effective. They said that they could identify visible results from them because these channels revolved around concrete issues and where they, as an organization, had clear goals. Outsider channels were also used to create attention and affect public discourse where identifying impacts was difficult.

Many informants expressed that using the media was a powerful way of influencing public actors. For example, by using the media to complain about and pressure the municipality, a building for people with intellectual disabilities received some adjustments. One respondent said:

> They listen to us to a certain extent. We attend meetings where we can speak about our case. However, in real politics and design, I feel that we do not get that far in measurable results. I think we are heard, or that we are a powerful factor in a way, because they do not like it if we write in the newspaper, but that is first and foremost it.
>
> Nora, organisation for people with intellectual disabilities

When using complaint systems, and most often the legal system, several informants described how they had taken issues to court, and that legal rulings had affected their practice in services and municipalities. Moreover, several informants expressed that their organizations often published reports as a response to recent policy decisions by public actors. These reports often contradicted the authorities and sometimes contributed to the services changing their practices. In addition, some informants said that their organizations developed services to meet their service user groups' needs because a public service had failed to do so. The effects of these activities were often easy to identify since they met a need among service user groups. For the service users, this included legal assistance that they could not afford elsewhere, getting information and receiving help and support in challenging situations. However, these activities were also perceived to affect others' perception of the organization and service user group, increasing their status and making the need for their service user group visible.

The informants mainly described using outsider channels when choosing their oppositional strategy, but many also spoke of councils and committees with which they experienced powerlessness, not being listened to and even feeling pressured or manipulated. For example, the latter occurred when a representative from an organization for people with intellectual disabilities felt pressured to express their approval of the mentioned building that they believed needed significant changes. The informants expressed that conflicts in direct channels could result in arguments and overt conflict or passivity or withdrawal from the process of the representatives. In addition, the informants described how difficult it could be to access direct channels. For example, one informant described the following situation:

> We have been trying to establish a service user council for a long time, and they have rejected it. We have not received good answers. The emails say they do not have a council today, and there are no plans to create one. I thought beforehand that they would appreciate that we had made contact and that our experience would interest them.
>
> Hedda, organisation for children with parents with substance use problems

With the oppositional strategy, the informants mainly used outsider channels. The impact of this strategy was often identifiable because it revolved around concrete issues. However, it could be challenging to be identified at the societal and political level.

The negotiation strategy

The most common strategy the informants spoke of was negotiation. This strategy included maintaining a good relationship with public actors while being critical and constructive, mainly through insider channels. Many informants described how their organizations had transitioned from being outsiders to insiders. This transition had been a gradual process associated with changed attitudes towards the service user group in society, the political arena and public services. Many informants believed that their protest acts had contributed to these changes. For example, one informant described how becoming an insider had modified the expectations and behaviour of their organization in the following way:

> Our leader stood outside Parliament for ten years and shouted. It takes some guts to open the door, go down, and say, 'Hey, come in then.' However, there is also a duty on the one who enters. Now it is serious; we are no longer in opposition; we are inside the door and must follow up.
>
> Helmer, organisation for people with substance use problems

When interest organizations chose negotiation strategies, the informants claimed that they mostly applied them through direct channels. Here, the involved actors often had different goals and priorities, but there were rarely overt conflicts. Further, the informants expressed that they tried to maintain good relationships with public actors, but still promoted a critical yet constructive voice.

The informants described using direct channels such as committees, councils, reference groups and formal meetings with public actors. Many expressed the importance of lobbying and building networks, highlighting the necessity of seminars, conferences and dissemination activities in public services or institutions. The informants also described how they combined these insider channels with moderate criticism in outsider channels (e.g. media, campaigns and publishing reports). For example, two informants representing children in contact with child protection services spoke of how they had pushed for and obtained legal changes by combining the use of the media, petitions and lobbying.

The informants believed that their negotiation strategies contributed to creating legitimacy among public actors. Being viewed as competent and constructive was vital for bringing about impact; on the other hand, promoting grassroots voices could also increase the organizations' legitimacy and influence. For example, one informant talked about how they had involved people with dementia directly in the development of a public strategy document:

> We talked to our partners and then got in touch with the Directorate of Health and the Ministry of Health. That was the start of working with the strategic plan. We involved people with dementia; there were people with dementia at all meetings. I believe involving people with dementia was vital in getting the government to develop the strategy with us.
>
> Solveig, organization for people with dementia

It could be challenging to see the results and identify cause-and-effect relationships from a negotiation strategy. Despite this, the informants were confident that this work had an impact and claimed that they noticed whether they were being listened to. Some exemplified this by describing processes that they believed were tokenistic, in which they retrieved information on already decided topics or spoke of public stakeholders unwilling to listen.

To identify their results, the informants suggested asking involved service users, studying documents and following issues over time. Even though the informants believed a focus on evaluation was necessary, many questioned whether it was possible to evaluate user participation. Many expressed that a lack of visible changes did not mean that user participation did not have an impact, as it could take time to achieve changes. Nevertheless, many had also experienced a lack of impact, which could be particularly visible in councils and committees with which they had a consultative role. In addition, the informants said that they rarely could take credit for impacts alone. One said the following:

> We were listened to, but at the same time, I think it is a little difficult to take credit for it alone. Very often, the same views have come from several actors.
>
> Hedvig, organization for asylum seekers

For the involved stakeholders and services, the effects of these negotiation strategies were reported as resulting in empowerment for service user representatives, changed attitudes and values among professionals and politicians and improved stakeholder relationships. However, a lack of visible impact or resistance from other stakeholders could result in decreased self-confidence or frustration, and telling one's own story could be challenging. In addition, the informants described strengthening existing or developing new user participation channels and improving the services provided to service users.

In contrast, identifying impacts at the political and societal levels was more challenging. However, many believed that they had contributed to developing new laws and guidelines, changes in the public discourse and political prioritizing (both economically and in terms of issues raised). Moreover, the informants expressed more certainty in influencing local politics than national politics, mentioning setting the agenda and affecting budgets and priorities. In addition, many said that they believed that their organization had contributed to reducing stigma and to changed societal attitudes towards the group.

In terms of negotiation strategy, the informants mainly used insider channels. The impact of this strategy was often challenging to identify at overarching levels, yet the informants believed that the potential was more significant than it was with the two other strategies. However, the informants also expressed that the strategy could result in tokenistic participation and a reduced critical voice.

Discussion

In the following section, we discuss the three strategies presented in the results, the impacts associated with participation and how interest organizations prefer different strategies.

Before we discuss our contribution to developing the insider/outsider perspective, however, we will compare our findings with recent literature. The findings suggest that organizations strategically manoeuvre between three different yet related strategies. An important finding is that the included organizations mainly apply insider strategies (e.g. participation in councils, committees and meetings with public actors), which aligns with recent literature suggesting that interest organizations prefer and increasingly use insider strategies (Mankell and Fredriksson 2020, 2021; Mellquist 2022a, 2022b). Moreover, the findings suggest that interest organizations often operate as insiders when applying the cooperative or negotiation strategy, which implies a close relationship with public actors. However, when creating a close relationship with public actors, there can be a risk of what Eriksson (2015, 2018) described as co-option, which would involve the representatives of interest organizations incorporating professionals' logic and argumentation as their own. Therefore, the cooperative strategy could be particularly challenging, as it may blur differences in stakeholders' logic and interests. In addition, close contact with public actors may reduce the opportunity or willingness to be critical, leading to user participation becoming tokenistic. Even if this seems like manipulation, all types of representation and interest promotion are about convincing other stakeholders of one's cause (Najam 2000). Nevertheless, interest organizations should pay attention to this risk of being co-opted, as public actors are often more resourceful and outnumber them in user participation channels.

The findings also suggest that the included organizations would strategically use outsider strategies (e.g. media use) to promote issues that they would not successfully promote as insiders. In contrast to the service user representatives in Mankell and Fredriksson's study (2020), many of the informants in our study were familiar with using outsider strategies, describing them as a powerful way of influencing public services. The findings also suggest that outsider strategies allow interest organizations to be more critical, which may lead to increased attention to their cause, ease

the recruitment of new members and gain sympathy in society. In addition, the informants referred to more explicit goals and impacts than was the case with insider strategies (e.g. through using the media). As such, outsider and insider strategies may be used to obtain different goals or as alternatives if the other method does not prevail. However, the informants rarely described using the oppositional strategy in insider channels such as councils or committees. This suggests that direct conflict can be challenging for interest organizations and representatives, which could be due to differences in resources (e.g. economic, knowledge or skills), autonomy and authority among public stakeholders and the organization's representatives. In addition, disagreeing with public actors may require knowledge, skills and confidence, can be uncomfortable and may strain relationships, thus weakening the organization's position. Therefore, outsider channels can allow for more criticism without the risk of compromising relationships.

Building on the insider/outsider perspective (Binderkrantz 2005), this study suggests that interest organizations do not use an exclusively outsider position or an exclusively insider position when attempting to influence public actors. Indeed, the findings suggest that interest organizations combine and manoeuvre between these positions based on their potential to exert influence. This may have to do with the general democratization of society and public services and the altered attitudes and status of service users and their organizations. Furthermore, while many interest organizations may have moved away from mainly using the tools of the classical protest movements, the organizations may still have a critical perspective on society and the welfare state. The themes presented in this paper reflect this as they have tried to grasp today's complex and dynamic relationship between interest organizations and public actors. Thus, this paper contributes to expanding our knowledge of how interest organizations work, which can be understood beyond the insider/outsider distinction.

The findings suggest that the strategies presented lead to many of the same, but also slightly different, impacts. Research on user participation at the collective level has mainly focused on participation through direct channels (e.g. councils and committees), and the informants' descriptions of impacts related to the negotiation strategy align with this, both at the individual and organizational levels (Daykin et al. 2007; Gathen, Slettebø, and Skjeggestad 2022; Mockford et al. 2012; Olsson et al. 2020; Rosenberg and Hillborg 2016). However, the cooperative and oppositional strategies may also lead to changes in service delivery, according to the informants. Thus, interest organizations may have multiple ways of having an impact.

The informants described that the impact of their activities was difficult to identify or understand as a linear process, particularly at the political and societal levels. These findings align with previous research that has often described difficulties in identifying impact (Daykin et al. 2007; Gathen, Slettebø and Skjeggestad 2022; Ocloo and Matthews 2016; Olsson et al. 2020; Usher and Denis 2022). Therefore, we suggest that understanding the impact of an interest organization's work requires a circular understanding in line with Banks, Herrington and Carter (2017) concept. Since many participation channels take the form of what Arnstein (1969) described as consultations and leave the decision-making to others, it seems challenging to apply an input/output analysis as it may be that numerous factors affect the outcomes. In addition, the findings illustrate that interest organizations simultaneously use a range of channels to influence public services connected to both insider and outsider positions. Thus, studying one isolated channel could lead to a lack of grasping the bigger picture, as interest organizations often pursue their goals through multiple channels and strategies at the same time. We therefore suggest broadening our understanding of impacts by focusing on how the participation process affects the involved stakeholders and how it affects organizations, services, politics and society. In addition, both this and previous studies (Gathen, Slettebø, and Skjeggestad 2022; Olsson et al. 2020) suggest that one must also consider the possibility of participation having a harmful impact or no impact, which is an issue of great importance for improving user participation.

Although the study design did not allow for a direct comparison of the organizations, the issue sparked our interest during the research process, particularly in the analysis. For example, although

the informants often described their negotiation strategy, some favoured a cooperative strategy while others preferred an oppositional one. This differences in strategy preference may be due to previous experiences and a desire to make an impact. Thus, if interest organizations find that public actors are unwilling to listen, using the media and the legal system may be a logical strategy for making an impact. In addition, being critical of services can be understood as mirroring members' feelings of anger or disappointment, which can be vital for obtaining internal legitimacy and creating external attention (Gnes and Vermeulen 2018). Organizations promoting issues deemed controversial in public discourse may also prefer a more oppositional approach, as has been the case regarding much of the debate on drug legalization. However, the findings suggest that the informants mainly favoured the negotiation strategy and the use of insider channels.

Methodological considerations

This study has several limitations. The study explores representatives' views and not the practice of user participation. The results should be considered in terms of the Norwegian context and would be most transferable to countries with similar democratic systems and welfare states.

The sample in this study included 2 to 3 informants representing each service user group; more informants from each group could have provided a broader and more nuanced description of the research topic. In addition, few informants in the study had service user experience themselves, which may have implications for the data material. However, this issue has also been highlighted in previous research and is an issue of current debate (see, for example, Raz et al. 2018; Rojatz, Fischer, and Van de Bovenkam, 2018; Schicktanz et al. 2018).

Given the heterogeneity among organizations in this field, representatives from other organizations could have provided further information. Nevertheless, this study aimed to explore the views of representatives from interest organizations on user participation, and the informants had expert knowledge about the research topic. Aligning with this aim, the variety of informants contributed to differing perspectives on the research topic and they spoke of various political issues and welfare services. These differences made it necessary to go beyond superficial descriptions and focus on the common phenomenon in the study, namely user participation through interest organizations. Future research could aim to develop a broader perspective on this topic. In addition, there is a need for more in-depth knowledge regarding the organizations that represent the different groups included in this study.

Although there was no formal user participation in the research process, we considered the qualitative approach itself to be an interactive and collaborative process (cf. Feiring, Heiaas, and Solvang 2017). Thus, interaction with the organizations during recruitment and with the informants before, during and after the interviews was vital in developing the study. Formal user participation in the research process might have increased the relevance of the research question and the interview guide and improved the analysis. However, there would also have been issues related to whom to involve in the research process, as the representatives in the sample represent service user groups with differing needs and priorities. Moreover, representatives of interest organizations are political actors interested in describing the world in a certain way. We as researchers also have values and pre-assumptions that influence the research and research process. In sum, we believe that in conducting this project, the interpretative nature of qualitative research suited the project, although we acknowledge that increased formal participation could also have benefited the project.

Conclusion

This study contributes to new knowledge of user participation at the service level by building on the insider/outsider distinction and suggests that interest organizations apply three different strategies to influence public actors. The informants seemed to prefer the negotiation strategy and mainly

chose to use insider channels to gain influence. However, it also seems that the oppositional strategy provides organizations with a second opportunity if the negotiation strategy does not provide the desired results. The risk of co-option may be present in the cooperative and negotiation strategies but could also provide significant impact if the goal and critical thinking are maintained.

The knowledge developed in this study may have implications for both practice and future research. Interest organizations can use this knowledge to develop their organizations and to determine how best to seek to influence public actors. Public actors, including social services and social workers, should acknowledge that protest and disagreement can be beneficial in the long run, as these can challenge established norms and discourses and thereby contribute to service improvements. In addition, public actors should pay attention to power inequalities and the possibility of co-option while focusing more on the impacts of user participation to avoid having it become a tokenistic practice. Future research could explore the topic further from the interest organization perspective, but researchers should also address the issue from other stakeholders' perspectives and study user participation practices.

Disclosure statement

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Ethical considerations

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