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Building Recognition, Redistribution, and Representation in Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods: Exploring the Potential of Youth Activism in Scotland

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Abstract

This is a time of intersecting crises for young people in Scotland. More than a decade of austerity, the Covid-19 pandemic, cost-of-living crisis, climate emergency, and ongoing global conflict all threaten youth security and create barriers to economic and civic participation. Alongside this, youth non-participation is often framed as an individualised moral problem, diverting focus away from its structural causes. Evidence on youth activism suggests that young people are seeking new, creative spaces and modes of expression to challenge stigma, express dissent, and challenge inequalities in their communities. With support from grassroots youth and community organisations, youth activists can build trust, critical thinking skills, and solidarity. However, the extent to which youth activism can succeed in challenging structural causes of inequality, especially in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, requires further scrutiny. We draw on Nancy Fraser's theory of participatory parity to explore how redistribution, recognition, and representation play out in the lives of young people, and how grassroots youth and community organisations support their development as activists. Based on a research study on the barriers and enablers to youth activism in Scotland, we seek to understand how neighbourhood-based efforts to challenge stigma and economic inequality build dignity and hope, how relationship-building between young people and the adults in their communities can support status recognition, and how these both contribute to emergent youth political representation.

Keywords

disadvantaged neighbourhoods; grassroots organisations; participatory parity; youth activism; youth work

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1. Introduction

This article analyses the extent to which place-based youth activism can address inequalities in youth participation in Scotland. Evidence suggests that young people are seeking new spaces to address and speak out about issues of social, economic, and political inequality in their local communities, with grassroots organisations offering unique spaces in which to explore identity, build support, and take action for change (Junnilainen, 2020; McBride, 2024). However, it is important to acknowledge that grassroots youth activity may be limited in addressing the institutional barriers to social justice (Ward et al., 2022).

We seek to understand the potential for place-based youth activism to address the structural causes of inequalities experienced by youth. Youth is understood here as a stage of transition described by Furlong (2012) as "a socially constructed intermediary phase that stands between childhood and adulthood" (p. 2). By analysing the pathways within and between N. Fraser's (2008) domains of participatory parity, this article explores how redistribution, recognition, and representation play out in the everyday lives of young people and how grassroots groups support them to challenge injustice through activism. We begin by exploring the context of crisis, youth activism, and the role of grassroots youth and community groups and then turn to consider Fraser's participatory parity theory, alongside theory on place-based stigma (Wacquant, 2008). The article then outlines the study's methodology and presents findings and discussion. We conclude by reflecting on the contribution that youth work can make to youth activism.

2. Youth Activism in a Time of Crisis

Multiple, intersecting crises are disproportionately affecting young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Scotland: 16.2% of young people are "not in employment, education, or training" (Scottish Government, 2023), barriers to adequate housing (Resolution Foundation, 2023) have left "generation rent" (Hoolachan et al., 2017) reliant on a poorly regulated private sector, and precarious, low-income employment is increasingly the norm. Mental health concerns have increased while support is difficult to navigate and involves long waiting times (Marini, 2022). Meanwhile, young people are pathologized for a lack of economic and civic participation (Bečević & Dahlstedt, 2022), while policies to "improve youth employability" frequently frame unemployment as an individualised moral problem and divert focus away from structural inequalities (McPherson, 2021). This creates opportunities for stigmatising narratives to take hold, where working-class people are blamed for the poverty that they experience (Tyler, 2013). These symbolic harms combine with material conditions to place young people in a cycle of disadvantage. Youth in disadvantaged neighbourhoods also often experience territorial stigma (Wacquant, 2008) due to the negative portrayal of the places in which they live.

There are various examples of young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods speaking up against these stigmatising narratives (McBride, 2024). Youth activists are seeking new spaces for political engagement, to create stories, films, music, and visual art (Kelly & Carson, 2012); to build friendship through bonds of community (Assan, 2023); and to find hope by collectivising despair (McGregor & Christie, 2021). Activism in this context, defined as "a desire to create change, to make the world into a different and better place" (Taft, 2010, p. 26), is an ethical practice, which involves the "problematization of established social norms, the invention of alternatives to those norms, and the creative practice of these newly invented possibilities" (Dave, 2011, p. 3). Youth dissent encompasses a spectrum of "dutiful," "disruptive," and "dangerous" actions

(O'Brien et al., 2018). Community interaction enables valuable intersections between personal and public activity from which collective action can spring (Cleaver, 2004).

Grassroots organisations support collective action on everyday inequalities (Christens et al., 2021; de St. Croix, 2016). In disadvantaged communities, informal education takes a relational approach that instils dignity (Slovenko & Thompson, 2016) and fosters belonging and agency (DiGiacomo, 2020). Space to explore different subjectivities allows critical thinking and builds solidarity (Kennelly, 2009). One such approach is youth work, whose principles include a holistic, youth-led approach, an ethic of care, voluntary participation, and social justice goals (Cooper, 2018). Youth work practice acts "as a glue between young people and their communities" (Miller et al., 2015, p. 468), building cultural and social bonds (Coburn, 2011) and promoting democratic education and civic participation (Coburn & Wallace, 2011). Relationships between workers and young people are characterised by "trust, respect, sincerity and, above all, authenticity" (Fyfe & Mackie, 2024, p. 1). A strong influence for youth work is critical pedagogy (Freire, 1972; hooks, 2010), locating the learner's life experience as central to the development of social and political literacy and using collective dialogue to build solidarity towards social change.

The wider political context has led to increased pressure for youth projects to meet targets to support "at risk" young people on diminishing budgets (Davidson, 2020, p. 254), amid an agenda increasingly focused on individualised "resilience" (Davidson & Carlin, 2019, p. 479). Evidence suggests that youth work is so under-resourced and overburdened that offering appropriate support to young people in the current context has become an impossibility, leading to the urgency for resistance; indeed, "resistance" has been suggested as an additional domain to Fraser's tripartite theory (Mackie, 2019). Alongside this, young people must navigate the "epistemological fallacy" (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007, p. 114) of individualised "freedom of choice," which obscures the reality of the constraints and inequalities in their lives.

3. Parity of Participation: Drawing on Fraser's Three Domains of Social Justice

Participation parity (N. Fraser, 2008) has been widely employed to explore issues of social justice in the field of education, such as in schooling (Keddie, 2012), pedagogy (Cho, 2017), social work (Hölscher et al., 2020), and youth work (Mackie, 2019). Fraser's theory of participatory parity asks, "How fair or unfair are the terms of interaction that are institutionalised in [the] society?" (Fraser et al., 2004, p. 378). N. Fraser's (2003) theory initially responded to concerns that attention to economic inequalities was being displaced by a growing politics of identity. She highlighted a need to maintain an analytical distinction between economic and social equity (redistribution and recognition) as central conditions in the struggle for social justice. She later added a third domain of representation, which addresses the question of "who counts" in decisions on social and economic justice: "not only who can make plans on redistribution or recognition, but also how such claims are mooted and adjudicated" (N. Fraser, 2008, p. 17).

Notwithstanding critiques that it draws artificial boundaries between the dimensions of inequality (Young, 1997), we propose that participatory parity offers a useful analytical frame for three purposes: to disentangle the everyday social problems encountered by young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods; to highlight the grassroots support which enables youth activism across domains; and to understand the social justice potential of activism at neighbourhood and institutional levels. Alongside this, we have found it useful to draw on literature on stigma as a helpful concept to explore the particular challenges of misrecognition, maldistribution,

and misrepresentation experienced by the young people in our study. Smets and Kusenbach (2020) argue that "stigmatisation is rooted in cultural beliefs; however, it also depends on power and social structures" (p. 2). This account helps to illuminate the structural inequalities from which stigma arises, and potential youth activist responses and resistance. Applying Fraser's theory to young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, we can see that the claim for "justice as *redistribution*" challenges the existence of economic inequality and social segregation as well as the associated "social bads" of violence, crime, and poor mental health, which affect young people. Solutions to maldistribution include the redistribution of income and "social goods" such as housing, education, and health, to improve life outcomes (N. Fraser, 1997, p. 17).

Recognition is about our ontological need, as social beings, to be recognized as equals. In Fraser et al. (2004), Fraser distinguishes between recognition as "identity" (affirmation) and recognition as "status" (transformation). Recognition as status seeks to locate responsibility for recognition with institutions and not with individuals or groups. She argues that this shifts attention to the ways that "youth" are conceptualised in status terms within different institutions (such as school, government, or welfare). Institutionalised status subordination (N. Fraser, 2003) positions some in society as inferior; solutions therefore need to focus not only on symbolic struggle but on challenge at a political level. At a neighbourhood level, experiences of territorial stigma can result in both external and internalised inequalities (Wacquant, 2008), low cultural value (Skeggs, 2004, Chapter 1), "othering," and disgust (Tyler, 2013). Stigmatising narratives may be seen as a rationale for economic inequality and exclusion of "the poor" by the privileged "non-poor" (Sayer, 2005), and as a justification for punitive approaches to "antisocial behaviour." Further, stigma may function to produce epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), where young people are discredited as "knowers" ("testimonial injustice"), or their experiences go unrepresented in society ("hermeneutic injustice").

Bourdieu's (1986, 1994) theory of economic, social, and cultural capital supports our understanding of the ways in which redistribution and recognition are intertwined. For example, it helps to explain why the actions of young people have currency in some institutional contexts and not others, which disadvantages people whose cultural capital is "fixed" due to societal stigma (Skeggs, 2004, Chapter 1). Prieur et al. (2023) suggest that given rising levels of economic inequality for younger generations, youth may emphasise "those aspects of embodied cultural capital which are more dependent on symbolic mastery and less on raw purchase power" (p. 371). Cultural/misrecognition activities are an understandable focus for young people when redistribution becomes less attainable.

A central concern of N. Fraser's theory is that conditions can also work *against* each other to create a "*redistribution-recognition dilemma*" (1997, p. 15, emphasis added). Recognition tends to call for group differentiation by valuing a group's cultural value, while redistribution aims to eradicate group specificity, such as Fraser's example of feminist calls for eradicating the social division of labour. Fraser argues that both are needed, because people need to both claim group specificity *and* deny it, therein highlighting the importance of maintaining both conditions in the struggle for justice.

Representation, N. Fraser's (2005, 2008) third dimension, draws attention to who is included and excluded from political voice and democratic life. The need to be represented, in all aspects of life including the political, can be expressed as "the right to have rights" (Arendt, 1949). The misframing of social problems can mean that the voices of the poor are excluded or disregarded, blocking their potential for protest and change. Misrepresentation manifests in democratic processes that may be organised in ways that prevent

youth activists from participating and making legitimate claims to justice. For example, adult-centric forms of democratic participation are skewed in favour of those with higher levels of social status and education (Dalton, 2017). Claims for social justice are in practice claims for "parity of participation" across all three domains (N. Fraser, 2008). In short, there can be "no redistribution or recognition without representation" (N. Fraser, 2010, p. 27).

By applying Fraser's theory to youth activism on everyday injustices in relation to the three domains, we seek to highlight the ways in which youth activists can contribute to social justice, but also to surface the institutional barriers they continue to face, and the potential next steps to fulfilling parity of participation in Scotland's disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

4. Methodology and Analysis

We draw on data from an exploratory research study to examine the barriers and enablers to youth activism in disadvantaged communities in Scotland, with young people aged 16 to 24. The study took a community-based research approach (Boyd, 2014), with the aim of co-constructing the research design with youth work practitioners. Three youth work practitioners took part in initial discussions to agree sampling and methods, with two additional youth workers later becoming involved due to their connections within two of the case study sites. The research design supported flexibility in participation, enabling pre-existing youth groups supported by a youth worker and/or in-depth interviews to take place, and three of the five youth workers who helped shape the research design were then interviewed to capture their insights and experiences. Three youth organisations in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (one semi-rural and two urban) took part in the research: Dalziel Arts, Kirkhill Youth, and Newbank Youth; two individual young people involved in activism around disabilities and climate also participated. A total of two focus groups and seven individual interviews took place, which were audio-recorded and transcribed. Both focus groups were based on pre-existing youth groups who work collectively on place-based youth activism. This had the benefit of offering an authentic depiction of collaborative work but meant that there was no opportunity to review whether mixed-gender focus groups would be the most effective way for all voices to be heard. In the case of Kirkhill Youth, researchers reflected that separate groups may have supported young women to have a stronger and more confident presence in dialogue; consequently, we have resolved to pay particular attention to this issue in future research.

Analysis of data was carried out collaboratively by two researchers to ensure consistency, taking an iterative, abductive approach (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014) that moved between the data and discussion of context, to build initial sub-themes. As the importance of the dynamic between identity and "everyday" local political representation began to emerge from the data, we considered that Fraser's theory of social justice might be a useful frame to analyse and extend the potential of youth activism. Our prior research (Ward et al., 2022) highlighted institutional barriers to collective empowerment at a neighbourhood level and we were interested to explore whether youth activists were encountering similar issues or if their autonomy over creative production enabled them to challenge institutional barriers in different ways. Researchers discussed emerging themes and sub-themes within each participant transcript. The themes were then aligned within the conceptual framework of participatory parity. The aim of an abductive and iterative approach was to ensure analysis considered data from a humanising, contextual, and subjective perspective, grounded in the lived experience of young activists. This resulted in the addition of literature on stigma, misrecognition, and

cultural capital to Fraser's framework, with the purpose of exploring the ways that youth activists were working to create change. Names of organisations and individuals who took part in the research were pseudonymised and identifiers removed to ensure participant anonymity. Organisational pseudonyms were chosen to reflect the Scottish urban/rural contexts, and to avoid the dehumanisation of place via numerical approaches to naming; participant pseudonyms were chosen based on popular first names from the year of participant birth not held by any existing participant. The study gained ethical approval from the University of Glasgow. Ethical procedures included informed consent which detailed the purpose and focus of the research study and participants' right to withdraw without detriment. We aimed to demonstrate a commitment to working alongside youth activists and youth organisations by supporting participant-led dialogue in interviews and focus groups and invited participants to be involved in follow-up research.

The three organisations and two individuals which took part in the research offer examples of youth activism across the geographical areas of Highlands, Central Belt, and Southern Scotland with an urban/rural contrast. Dalziel Arts has existed for a decade and acts as a "hub" for community projects, many of which have an arts-based focus. Though based in a town, it serves a population across a vast rural area, with a mixed socio-economic profile. The organisation provides a supportive space for young people to pursue their creative and activist interests. Kirkhill Youth, located in an area with high levels of deprivation, has operated for 20 years. The organisation offers a daily drop-in, evening youth club, and holiday activities. It recently began Kirkhill TV, a YouTube channel where young people create news and drama content. Newbank Youth, also operating in a neighbourhood with high levels of poverty, started in 2017, following local disturbances due to antisocial behaviour. It offers a youth club and an employability space, where young people can gain work skills and qualifications in beauty therapy, car valeting, and catering. Jamie and Lianne were independent youth activists involved in disability and climate activism, respectively.

Table 1. Research participants.

Dalziel Arts—Focus Group	
Youth participants (6)	Esther, Molly, Chris, Madeline, Lauren, Eleanor
Kirkhill Youth—Focus Group	
Youth participants (9)	Lyle, Alana, Shelby, Susannah, Jacob, Hadley, Sabrina, Callie, Kaia
Youth workers (2)	Patrick, Isaac
Newbank Youth—Interviews	
Youth participant (1)	Rory
Youth workers (2)	Eva, Innis
Independent—Interviews	
Youth participant (1)	Jamie
Youth participant (1)	Lianne

In the next section, we present findings from the research, organised thematically around the three domains of *recognition*, *redistribution*, and *representation*. In each domain we document youth experiences of injustice, their journeys towards activism, and the potential outcomes. The findings begin with the domain of *recognition*, since this domain was associated with participants' initial journeys into activism.

5. Exploring Parity of Participation Across the Youth Work Areas

5.1. Recognition

Participants raised recognition injustices in relation to social and cultural conditions, and to place. Several activists discussed the overlap between identity recognition and local representation, from visibility to political responsibility. Personal journeys into activism were often motivated by challenging non-recognition or misrecognition of race, class, gender, sexuality, or disability. Youth activism used public events and creative arts such as video, visual arts, and music to present alternative narratives and increase visibility.

The theme of stigma came through strongly across the research, either regarding stigmatised identities, including "problem youth," or negative stereotypes about neighbourhoods.

Madeline, who was employed by Dalziel Arts as well as having broader activist involvement, talked about feeling passionate about racial injustice. Activism around the visibility of race and ethnicity and safe spaces for participation was particularly important in a semi-rural area with a predominately white and homogenous population. Madeline also highlighted how this activity crossed over towards the domain of representation, by contributing to visibility of minority groups in the region:

> I think my personal agenda, like, what I want to see in the region is probably more, like, representation, you know, minority communities having safe spaces for them to feel like they are engaging with and integrating with the community in some way.

Molly also works for Dalziel Arts, but reflected on their journey into activism being driven by a commitment to LGBTQ+ rights:

> On my, like, personal level, my…a lot of my activism centres around LGBTQ+ activism….That's all, kind of….So when there was a lot of stuff around the GRA [Gender Recognition Act], I organised the demonstration of trans solidarity in the town centre. So, a lot of it is around social issues.

They reflected positively on being involved in organising a local, community-based Pride celebration which had been organised in response to a sense that Pride had become "too corporate." However, Molly's account demonstrated that the organisation of this event required a huge amount of unpaid effort from organisers, which participants referred to as "activist burnout." This was echoed by Esther, the youngest participant in the Dalziel focus group, who described herself as having an anarchist outlook and a distrust of mainstream politics. Esther emphasised that recognition claims cannot be addressed in a tokenistic manner:

> You get the occasional thing where it's like, now is the time that we're listening to queer voices…but actually that's not what needs to happen. Like, it needs to be that those voices are heard all the time. They're through everything that you do and not just that one thing.

Esther's suggestion demonstrates an understanding of the need to move beyond identity affirmation towards institutionalised status transformation for LGBTQ+ youth (Fraser et al., 2004). A social justice analysis requires an intersectional lens that considers the social, economic, and political inequalities experienced by LGBTQ+ youth (N. Fraser, 1997, Chapter 1, 2005).

Jamie, who is involved in disability activism, reflected on a sense of non-recognition experienced by many disabled people and described this as a fundamental motivation to becoming involved in awareness-raising for disability and mental health. Participants' identities as racialised minorities, disabled young people, or LGBTQ+-identifying, were often strong motivators for their involvement in activism, and activism in these areas had the potential to increase political representation through improved local visibility.

Lyle also described his journey into activism following a struggle with mental health:

> I hit a bit of a rough patch for a few years…suffering with really bad mental health. And then…last year, I decided that I was going to try to have a better life. So, I got back involved in the Kirkhill Youth and a lot of charities [health and wellbeing; community development]….I thought, if I'd been accessing these services throughout my rough patches, then I would have been doing so much better….So, I'm trying to spread awareness and make sure that more young people know that these services are here for them and whatever they need.

Lyle's experience led to a desire to support other young people facing barriers to participation. The ability to draw on lived experience as a source of credible and valuable knowledge may be viewed as a form of testimonial justice (Fricker, 2007) as well as an opportunity to recognise experiences which can be invisibilised.

Participants recounted the pressures of undertaking activism, which were increased by a lack of resources in disadvantaged communities. Individual youth agency was frequently constrained by structural inequalities related to lower levels of economic and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), highlighting the overlap between recognition and redistribution.

Participants in all sites explored recognition through the lens of *place*. In the semi-rural area, most participants had returned to the area after initially believing it was necessary to move away to cities to pursue careers or creative endeavours. The story of a place and the available opportunities for young people were influenced by geography, transport, and infrastructure. However, stigma also informed dominant narratives of an area as somewhere young people should leave in order to succeed. Chris, a young musician undertaking an arts-focused internship, explained this as a strong motivating factor for joining Dalziel Arts:

> There is a, sort of, stigma…you know, it's not the place where you stay to develop your creative career. People would just even move to big cities like Glasgow or Edinburgh or, you know, down south or whatever. And, yeah, like, I just wanted to be a part of that changing opinions any way that I could, and just showcasing that this town is a good place for creative types.

This potential to challenge place-based stigma (Wacquant, 2008) was also highlighted at Kirkhill Youth. Kirkhill TV provided a vehicle for young people to critique local issues and showcase their community. The channel offered a resource for the whole community and was accessed by a wide range of residents and community groups. Since culture is a key site where class-based inequalities are reproduced (Bourdieu, 1986), the development of a resource through which young people could challenge stigma and celebrate the positive aspects of local cultural life was an important form of resistance. Lyle discussed how the channel helped to challenge negative portrayals associated with the neighbourhood:

> Everybody thinks Kirkhill is just a [housing] scheme, it's just stinking, it's full of neds [a derogatory term associated with delinquency and low-level crime in Scotland]. And it's not, like, showcased: the nice parts of Kirkhill...and even just Kirkhill TV as a premise itself, shows that people from the community want to tell people about the community, and show people the good aspects of the community...it's about breaking a stigma, that's what it really comes down to.

Pejorative dominant narratives associated the neighbourhood with disgust and "othered" young people through alienating or derogatory language (Tyler, 2013). Young activists' TV programmes documented a rich cultural life, challenging misrecognition based on status subordination and positioning young people as creators of knowledge (Fricker, 2007). The presentation of a wide variety of content allowed young people to sidestep the limitations of "youth" identity affirmation by creating alternative representations of the diverse activities which constitute cultural life in Kirkhill. We suggest that this work can be considered as a contribution to status transformation (N. Fraser, 1997, Chapter 1), although to gain greater institutional traction, the TV channel would need an audience beyond Kirkhill.

Challenging negative stereotyping also shaped the approach at Newbank Youth. Rory described his early experiences as part of a group of youths:

> There was always police attention on us....That...led to us being barred from local establishments such as [fast-food outlet], [supermarket chain]....So, it was quite hard...because there was nowhere else for us to go, nothing else for us to do, apart from being on the streets or going to these places. Which then in turn...the police [got] called anyway.

Concerns that this would lead to "serious trouble" led to Rory taking a job at the fast-food outlet while still at school. When the organisation promoted him to a management role, he engaged with local groups to prevent antisocial behaviour, because "I knew how to calm certain people down....I was big on going out and talking to the community." Despite this, violence increased, and Rory contacted Newbank Youth for support:

> Staff were being assaulted and followed home; security guards were being physically attacked. We had to get security seven days a week....I contacted Eva and explained the issues that we were having...clips of CCTV, the incident logbook...the sheer amounts of issues that...that were really violent....We had a meeting. It was myself, [local authority], higher management from [supermarket chain], [fast-food outlet], the police, the Newbank Youth Club, and then [local anti-violence organisation] and the Violence Reduction Unit within Police Scotland.

Newbank Youth brokered conversations with young people to explore the reasons behind the disruptions. Youth worker Eva identified young people as feeling increasingly alienated within their own community. She described the culture surrounding youth as "harsh" and "punitive," both in school and in the justice system, with these approaches seen to be justified by the framing of youth non-compliance as "antisocial behaviour" (Sayer, 2005). Eva opened a dialogue with local staff from police, health, and education settings, with the aim of recognising that youth disruption may be trauma-related (Ko et al., 2008). Trauma-informed praxis (O'Toole, 2022) mitigates against individualising blame for behaviours, by understanding violence as a reasonable response to stress from past or ongoing trauma. This collaborative learning process reframed assumptions of youth violence in the context of trauma, offering scope for localised status transformation

(N. Fraser, 1997, Chapter 1) with key staff from local institutions. A wider institutional shift can also be seen in Scotland's policy reframing of youth disruption as a public health issue, with services such as the Violence Reduction Unit helping to change the public narrative around violence (A. Fraser & Gillon, 2023).

Across the sites, it was clear that (mis)recognition struggles shaped the lives of young people and that this was often their personal motivation towards activism. Young people enjoyed the creative autonomy afforded through collective action. Kirkhill TV presented a range of programmes including news and serious debate, gameshows, and homegrown movies; Dalziel Arts critiqued the commercial capitalism of the Pride "brand" (Conway, 2023) by creating a grassroots celebration; and Newbank Youth organised street art and music events to stimulate creative and political expression. However, youth activists also understood a progression between recognition activity and political representation. They also articulated the importance of challenging institutional status subordination through the creation of cultural products on their own terms. The findings also emphasised the central role that grassroots youth organisations play in providing resources and platforms through which youth activists can challenge misrecognition and misrepresentation. The next section presents findings in relation to redistribution.

5.2. Redistribution

Across the sites, participants raised experiences of economic inequality in access to housing, employment, transport, and community resources. Young people in Kirkhill and Newbank associated economic segregation with living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. Participants in Dalziel highlighted the underfunded public transport system and geographical isolation due to the rural context. The study yielded some examples of youth activism to highlight and/or address distributive inequalities.

On Kirkhill TV, programmes addressed issues of streetlighting, housing, and finance. These issues were perceived to be caused by maldistribution of resources, such as a lack of municipal maintenance, lack of adequate education, and long-term health and employment inequalities. Lyle and Patrick discussed the latter, commenting on the framing of education towards a compliant workforce:

> Lyle: I can't believe that young people don't know about those things, like how to set up a bank account, how to deal with housing. It's things you need to survive….You can't buy food if you don't have a bank…you need to have a bank to actually have a life….And you don't get taught how to do that in school….They're just making people for the workforce…they don't teach to your strength; they teach you to what society deems acceptable.

> Patrick: Service jobs isn't it; it's to create service workers.

Lyle recorded a news programme to inform young people about housing and financial support, sharing his struggle to secure a tenancy and become financially independent.

Young people at Newbank Youth also highlighted maldistribution in relation to a lack of spaces to learn and barriers to employment, but in contrast to Lyle at Kirkhill, wanted local jobs because they felt uncomfortable travelling beyond their own neighbourhood due to fears of territorial violence. These priorities resulted in an employability project where young people could train and work locally in beauty therapy, car valeting, and

catering. Eva explained the shift from "hopelessness" to "Look, this is possible, you could do this." The project offered wraparound support, such as counselling and therapies, money and legal advice, and access to individual grants to support driving lessons and the purchase of equipment. Nonetheless, it is notable that the employability project focused on skills related to potentially precarious service sector employment, which perhaps demonstrates the limits of youth activism to challenge the status quo or needs to be seen as a continuum towards more sustainable employment opportunities. Furlong and Cartmel's (2007) concept of epistemological fallacy remains relevant as structural inequalities affecting youth are reproduced over generations.

Youth workers discussed the value of networks as a form of redistributive capital. Eva brought in external contacts as support: "In these young people's lives, they don't have those kinds of networks. Because sometimes, it's who you know, not what you know."

For Innes, a youth work approach helped to reframe the loyalty from youth gang membership as a form of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986):

> I really realised the strength of networks...the strength of numbers, and people, and having people together. Because, actually, nobody ever describes gangs as a movement, but...it's a mobilisation of young people to stand up for something that they believe in....We expect young people to stop being angry, and...outspoken, and challenging authority. And for me, that's the last thing I want young people to lose. I just want them to do it in a way that's more socially acceptable.

Innes' reflection on encouraging youth to collectively challenge injustice indicates the importance of social capital in redistribution as well as recognition struggles. He highlights that pre-existing social capital can be misrecognised through status subordination of youth behaviours and reframed positively through youth worker support.

Young people's wellbeing and opportunities were shaped by variable access to resources. In rural areas, where public transport was unreliable and expensive, Molly explained that there was an unavoidable dependence on cars which excluded many from activities:

> If you want to actually be able to go and do fun things in this region, you need to come from money or you need to have parents that have money, or you need to have your fingers in the right pies to know where to get funding.

In the same focus group, Madeline compared the experiences of two young people who were still at school and had been volunteering in a community theatre project, reflecting that only one of them who lived in the town centre was able to continue with the theatre project and to gain valuable experience:

> [He is] going to have a flourishing career and just 'cause he lives in the centre of town so he can come to the theatre every day after school. And it's just that comparison of, like, this person's equally as talented as...you know, they just don't have the same opportunities in [smaller, more geographically isolated town].

Geographical isolation was also raised by Esther as preventing involvement in activism:

> You just need to have money to get involved with activism, the way that it works now. And, like, actually maybe we should stop thinking about it from, you need to have this to get into this, and instead be like, okay, what can we just…how can we change it so that that isn't even a requirement anymore.

This suggests that young people require a particular level of economic capital or the "right" social connections (Bourdieu, 1986) to engage in activism, particularly when financial insecurity is combined with the consequences of geographical isolation.

Whilst young people in Dalziel were less likely to experience high levels of poverty due to the area's varied socio-economic profile, activities to reduce isolation and promote wellbeing were increasingly competing for resources with schemes to tackle pressing material manifestations of poverty. For example, Molly explained, "We're going up against food banks. And it's how do you…you obviously can't even argue with that because of course, like, people need to fucking eat."

Across the three youth organisations, precarity of funding and staff contracts were a continuous battle. One organisation received core state funding, but this was due to end in 2024; the other two were reliant on piecemeal grants and donations from charitable foundations. Financial insecurity placed pressure on staff to work unpaid overtime on shoestring budgets, undermining wellbeing and preventing longer-term planning. This constrained the potential of third-sector youth organisations seeking to address a vacuum left by the retreat of the state in contemporary neoliberal society.

The next section presents findings that relate to the third R, representation.

5.3. Representation

Across sites, young people perceived that real change was more likely at a grassroots level and this was the key focus for activism.

Newbank Youth advocated for youth decision-making in all aspects of the project. Eva commented:

> [Young people are] part of the solution, more than we are, because they live here, and they know what the problems are. And if we can involve them in the vision, and what we're doing, they've got the lived experience to make a difference.

Linking back to misrecognition, Innes spoke of the change brought about by this approach:

> They're…still involved in some level of antisocial behaviour.…But they're now very much valued members of the community, too. And people living around…the hotspots, wherever they hang about, have reported not feeling as scared to walk out their buildings.…So, it's changing the relationships within the community, which I think is huge.

By interviewing the local MP as part of his programme on housing, Lyle was able to draw political attention to the issue and highlight that schools could better equip young people by teaching life skills. While the MP

encouraged expression of his views on behalf of young people to the local authority, there was no youth political forum to which he could directly propose action: an example of the wider institutional barriers to representation faced by youth activists in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

The adult-centric nature of politics was emphasised by Jamie, a disabled young person, who felt that young people's experiences and input were not equally valued with adults', leading to tokenistic, one-off consultations:

> It's, kind of, disheartening when you get involved in an opportunity and they plonk you in a room with…several adults and it's the adults that are the ones that simply know best. And that's something that I find a lot, and other young people find a lot, but also using young people as…I call it decoration.

Jamie's account illustrated that recognition means being noticed by people in positions of power and occupying those positions as elected representatives themselves, an example of the connection between Fraser's dimensions of recognition and representation. When asked what people in positions of power and influence could do to challenge the injustices experienced by disabled people, Jamie emphasised the importance of being recognised: "I would say first thing…first is notice us. Actually, come out and speak to us." Jamie went on to explain the importance of seeing disabled people *in* positions of power, giving the example of disabled members of the Scottish parliament, which helps to challenge stigma and negative stereotypes around disability.

Esther, who had joined an organisation with a climate justice focus, explained that younger members were trying to challenge the dominance of the majority older, more socially and politically conservative membership, "to actually make sure that it just doesn't continue being a bunch of old white men. Yeah. And right now, we're, kind of, trying to radicalise them a little bit [laugh] 'cause they tend to play it safe."

Molly's journey into activism started with engagement in mainstream politics but work experience in Westminster deterred them from pursuing this further. They described learning for the first time that MP's meals in Westminster were subsidised with public money:

> And that just absolutely disgusted me. I was like, how are we living in a society where kids can't get free school meals but politicians can get a…like, fucking beef Wellington for their lunch for £1.50….And it, kind of, made me realise that real change doesn't happen from that kind of government or political level. It happens from [the] community base.

Molly's account, like many other participants, recognises the importance of building activism from grassroots, lived experience at a local level. Whilst youth activists generally sought to engage with mainstream politicians to garner support, there was often a lack of institutional support for young people's vision for change.

6. Conclusion

Our findings revealed that the domains of recognition, redistribution, and representation were interlinked in the experiences of youth activists. Affirmational recognition built towards transformational recognition, and this offered a springboard to find new ways to challenge the misrepresentation of youth and their

communities. Developing a critical understanding of their political misrepresentation encouraged youth activists to challenge issues of maldistribution and disadvantage in their communities. However, this creative, exploratory work (such as TV programme production and DIY festivals) was limited to the local sphere and took place against a backdrop of increasing cuts and generational socio-economic inequality.

Activist journeys often began with misrecognition. The value of youth agency and dignity were emphasised, resonating with evidence that social recognition can have as significant an effect on wellbeing as income (Hojman & Miranda, 2018). What began as affirmational recognition in relation to class, race, disability, or sexuality, built towards young activists reframing the ways that youth in their communities were represented. The creative exploration of different identities was a strong motivator for youth activists. Expanded modes of societal participation promoted fun and "collective wellbeing" (Lamont, 2017, p. 21) and offered a counterpoint to a neoliberal focus on individual achievement. Kirkhill TV presented serious debate and created gameshows and homegrown movies; Dalziel Arts critiqued the commercial capitalism of the Pride "brand" (Conway, 2023) by creating a grassroots celebration; and Newbank Youth organised street art and music events to stimulate creative and political expression. These are important examples of promoting and making visible cultural activities and identities that are devalued and "othered" (Bourdieu, 1986). Such acts may also be considered as a "politics of becoming" (Asenbaum, 2023) which examines not only how young people are viewed from the outside, but how, from the inside, they come to understand and play their own multiplicity of identity (Sen, 2006) and as credible sources of knowledge (Fricker, 2007). This suggests the site of recognition as one of freedom and escape, as well as a forge for new forms of representation. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge that this focus on culture and recognition may itself be shaped by the increasing unattainability of redistribution, particularly for this generation of youth. Findings thus largely support the theory of a generational "tip" away from redistribution, which has resulted in young people having to focus more on symbolic, cultural challenges to inequality (Prieur et al., 2023).

Grassroots organisations offered a critical space for young people to develop as activists, offering space and equipment, supportive adults, and social networks. All three grassroots organisations supported critical dialogue to explore and unpack issues of territorial stigma (Wacquant, 2008). They enabled young people to build alternative narratives, using creative, DIY approaches. The creation of alternative knowledges and participation structures challenges pre-existing power structures, suggesting these examples of activism as potentially "disruptive" and "dangerous," and more likely to be transformative in the long term (O'Brien et al., 2018).

N. Fraser's (2008) theory of participatory parity helped us to draw out the social justice achievements and further potentials of youth activism but also highlighted their partial nature. Youth activists gave examples of transformational recognition, but the transformation of status as highlighted by Fraser et al. (2004) was usually limited to local "institutions," such as local public sector staff and local audiences. Nevertheless, cultural media had potential to gain greater political traction via a wider audience and targeted campaigns, and youth autonomy over creative production offered greater freedom than had previously been possible. To draw attention to the complexity of the challenge of parity of participation for young activists in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Scotland, we found it helpful to supplement Fraser's analytical frame with literature on stigma. The concept of stigma highlights both the complexity of the challenge and the interlinking domains as activist work builds from one domain to another. To challenge stigma, activists must work across a range of actors (Bos et al., 2013; Smets & Kusenbach, 2020), from those people who are

stigmatised, to institutional actors within their neighbourhoods, and wider public perceptions. They must also navigate different types of stigma such as stereotyping public narratives, epistemic injustice, and a lack of social and economic capital. The interlinking of domains in young activists' work is demonstrated by the movement from affirmational identity work towards status recognition, from affirmational recognition towards a critique of the structural causes via maldistribution, and from creative new presentations of selves towards emergent and disruptive political "becomings" (Asenbaum, 2023; O'Brien et al., 2018). The frame of participatory parity helps to highlight the social, cultural, and political successes of grassroots activism in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and to pinpoint where further work is required. We are keen to develop our research in this area, and to collaborate further with youth activists to understand the practical steps to gaining wider political traction.

While the evidence on activism offers hope for young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the wider context of collective civil precarity (Herranz, 2024) threatens the sustainability of such work. Youth activists spoke of burnout due to long hours and a lack of resources. Grassroots youth and community organisations were consistently found to plug gaps and address injustices created by the withdrawal of the state, supporting alienated young people while simultaneously bearing the brunt of responsibility for finding resources to do so. By documenting their work towards social justice, we aim to contribute to raising the profile of these vital, yet fragile, responses to crisis.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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