

# Can service users speak? Dissenting voices and subaltern speech in social work

Qualitative Social Work  
2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–16  
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DOI: 10.1177/14733250221150206

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## Abstract

Service user involvement and participatory research are central concepts in social work practice and research. Inspired by Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak,” this article draws on the poststructural and postcolonial theory to unpack the assumptions about essentialism, representation, and division of labor underlying the concepts of involvement, participation, and voice. The article combines Spivak’s theory about the subaltern and Rancière’s theory about politics as dissensus to shed light on how the space for authentic service user voice risks being minimized, corrupted, and co-opted. I discuss the challenges arising from this for understanding service user involvement and participatory knowledge production and suggest possible steps toward handling these challenges.

## Keywords

Rancière, service user involvement, Spivak, voice

## Introduction

Inspired by Spivak’s “Can the subaltern speak?” (2010 [1999]) and the philosophy of Rancière, this paper critically analyzes the concepts of “voice” and “speech” related to social work research and practice. Specifically, how can subalternity and dissensus help us understand the challenges of service user involvement and participation? Social work has been criticized for handling too easily questions about the philosophical assumptions and basic concepts underpinning social work theories (Halvorsen, 2019; Garrett, 2015). Accordingly, service user involvement and participatory research approaches seldom question the ontological and epistemological assumptions about whether service users can

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“speak,” that is, raise their voice, be heard, understood, and considered. Instead, it is taken for granted that the authentic speech of the service user is accessible to us. To understand the implications of this, I argue that we need to move beyond simplistic and idealized understandings of participation and scrutinize the foundations of participatory discourse. This article aims to address this challenge while also answer to calls for more postcolonial and post-structural explorations of social work (Garrett, 2018; Ranta-Tyrkkö, 2011).

There is no lack of critical perspectives on service user involvement and participation in general. Studies have criticized institutional and structural conditions for service user involvement and the power of discourse (Cruikshank, 1993; Carr, 2007; Farr, 2018; Hodge, 2005). Others have tried to distinguish between different types of service user involvement based on power, level, system, or strategy (Tritter and McCallum, 2006; Cornwall, 2008; Pretty, 1995; Burns and Taylor, 2000; McLaughlin, 2010). Ladders and cross-tables might help assess practice or categorize data but offer little sense-making tools for what is happening in the process, including conflict, co-optation, and resistance (Eriksson, 2018a; Natland and Hansen, 2017).

The challenges that arise from assuming that speech is an authentic representation of a “self” or reality are well-known in interpreting qualitative data in general (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003; Gubrium and Holstein, 1997; Jerolmack and Khan, 2014), as well as discussed in this journal (Hardesty and Gunn, 2019; Ben-Ari and Enosh, 2010). The primary strategy to remedy problems emerging from the “linguistic turn” has been strategies characterized by researcher reflexivity and situating the researcher (Harding, 1990; Haraway, 2013). Although many qualitative studies still assume some form of face value of the material, this is not the concern of this paper. Instead, this paper challenges the assumptions of speaking underpinning involvement or participation in social work practice and in social work research, where the assumption of authenticity is primarily taken for granted.

A quick article search in *Qualitative Social Work* gave 701 hits on the word “voice” and 814 on the word “speech,” suggesting that these are important concepts in social work research. But what is a voice, and how do we distinguish a voice and speech from other qualitative data to be interpreted? Such topics relate to issues of representation and division of labor, which are central to the philosophies of Spivak and Rancière. In this article, I introduce the main concepts and understandings in the philosophies of Spivak and Rancière related to speech and voice. I then discuss challenges arising for social work practice and research from these insights and suggest some tentative paths toward remedying these challenges. Both Spivak and Rancière have been put into conversation with social work earlier, but to a lesser degree related to each other, and not in-depth or regarding the topic of service user voice.

## **Spivak and the problem of the subaltern voice**

Social categories not only allow us to identify problems but can also naturalize certain phenomena or hierarchies (Douglas, 2011). Meaning is constructed by difference and conflict, often between a positive and a negative (Derrida, 1982). For example, the service user does not exist without a service provider, and there is a hierarchy where one term

governs the other. Deconstructing such oppositions is only possible by inverting the hierarchy to show its constructed and arbitrary nature (Derrida, 1982). In the postcolonial theory, *the subaltern* represents populations socially, politically, and geographically outside the hegemonic power structure of the colony. This encompasses the intersections of race, class, gender, and religion that reinforce marginality (Green, 2011).

Spivak argues that any attempt to describe an autonomous subaltern is essentialist, defined by and for the hegemonic elite. We are writing *our* hegemonic theoretical assumptions into people's lives. Master words like "the workers" or "the colonized" assume these are groups of coherence and solidarity. She argues that the Western radical political intellectuals romanticize oppressed people. By assuming the subaltern is a sovereign subject, they fail to acknowledge their position as intellectuals within the hegemonic discourse and the subaltern as outside of this discourse. This assumption implies a hero's need to bring these sovereign subjects' voices to discourse (Spivak, 2010 [1999]).

Spivak questions the assumption that speech is a credible expression of the self because speech is dependent on the *psychobiography* of the subject. The utterance is interpreted in the hegemonic discourse, overlooking the complexity of the production of a sense of self (Spivak, 1996): "... no speech, no 'natural language' (an unwitting oxymoron), not even a 'language' of gesture, can signify, indicate or express without the mediation of a pre-existing code" (Spivak, 1996 [1985]: 223). By "speaking," Spivak is talking about the transaction between the speaker and the listener. She argues that subaltern insurgency is an effort to involve oneself in representation, not according to the lines laid down by the official institutional structures of representation. Most of these attempts are disavowed as barbarian, and since every moment noticed as a case of subalternity is undermined, the true subaltern is never seen. There is a not-speakingness to the very notion of subalternity (Spivak, 1996).

Spivak's critique has inspired a variety of fields outside of colonial studies. Subaltern psychology argues that theory in psychology silences the client's story and frames it in a colonized version (Swartz, 2005). The construction of the homeless identity positions people outside of discourse and can include a loss of social identity with its focus on a singular homeless identity that renders certain groups invisible based on race, gender, and abilities (McCarthy, 2013; Edgar and Doherty, 2001; Pleace, 2010). Service user involvement discourse puts the social worker in a position representing authentic service user voices while cementing and inaugurating the social worker as the provider of proper knowledge, representing silenced voices that cannot speak for themselves. Two types of silencing can be distinguished. One is speech act failures where the subaltern cannot speak, is not being listened to, and, therefore, is not heard. The other type is a superimposition when someone else speaks for them (Bertrand, 2018). Since service users are defined by their difference, their subjectivity remains impossible to represent without this intellectual hero. Any attempt to access their voice only serves to maintain their silence and the intellectual position necessary to represent them. Thereby integration presupposes othering and objectification (Spivak, 1996 [1985]).

### *Conditions of possibility and impossibility: ethical singularity*

When Spivak says that subalterns cannot speak, she means they cannot be heard by the privileged (Spivak, 1996; Buzungu, 2021). If she makes herself heard, she is no longer a subaltern but an “organic intellectual.” This change cannot be brought about through representation. Spivak uses the words *Darstellung* and *Vertretung* from Marx to describe two different kinds of representations. By overlooking this distinction, portraying someone is misinterpreted as walking in their shoes. There is no representation without a portrayal, which in principle is a political representation of oneself, not of the subaltern. Representation is, therefore, always double and problematic, never complete. By confusing aesthetic representation (*Darstellung*) with political representation (*Vertretung*), the oppressed are further marginalized (Spivak, 2010 [1999]). Attempts at expressing the authentic subaltern voice become a masquerade, where the intellectual takes the role of an absent non-representing author, letting the oppressed people speak for themselves (Spivak, 1996 [1985]). Instead, Spivak argues that the only opportunity to access the subaltern voice is through establishing ethical singularity with the subaltern. This should not be confused with “raised consciousness fieldwork” (Spivak, 1996: 269) but includes making the subaltern into an organic intellectual, which implies not being a subaltern anymore (Spivak, 1996 [1994]). In her preface to her translation of the novel *Imaginary Maps*, she elaborates:

This encounter can only happen when the respondents inhabit something like normality. (...) In fact, it is impossible for all leaders (subaltern or otherwise) to engage every subaltern in this way, especially across the gender divide. This is why ethics is the experience of the impossible. (...) the future is always around the corner; there is no victory, but only victories that are also warnings (Spivak, 1996 [1994]: 270).

Spivak argues that the possibility of learning from below only can be earned by the slow effort of responding ethically and learning from the compromised, turning the roles from object to teacher (Spivak, 1996 [1994]). Often these organic intellectuals who become spokespersons for the subaltern groups are taken as token subalterns (Spivak, 1996). The effort is ignored by our desire to have our cake and eat it too: “that we can continue to be as we are, and yet be in touch with the speaking subaltern” (Spivak, 1996: 292). The task at hand would be to enter into a responsible structure with the subaltern:

“...without this quick-fix frenzy of doing good with an implicit assumption of cultural supremacy which is legitimized by unexamined romanticization, that’s the hard part, (...) working for the subaltern is precisely to bring them, *not* through cultural benevolence, but through extra-academic work, into the circuit of parliamentary democracy. (...) working for the subaltern *means* the subaltern’s insertion into citizenship, whatever that might mean, and thus undoing of subaltern space” (Spivak, 1996: 293).

Making service users heard would thereby depend on deconstructing the very notion of *service-userness*, engaging in learning from *service users*, and restoring service users as citizens—this process necessities political subjectivation.

## Rancière and political subjectivation

A general challenge for poststructural social work is coping with the related risk of determination. If power relations are everywhere, as Foucault postulated, then in the name of what could resistance occur? (May, 2009). Rancière bases resistance upon the presupposition of equality. *Democracy* is not a system of representation or government but continuing disruptions and manifestations of equality. He reminds us that the term democracy was invented by its opponent, Plato, in support of the people entitled to govern. Democracy for Rancière means ruling by those not entitled to rule, who have no speech to be heard. *Demos* is the surplus community. Politics and democracy are essentially the same process, not a conflict of interests, but a clash of logics (Rancière, 2004, 2015):

Political conflict does not involve an opposition between groups with different interests. It forms an opposition between logics that count the parties as parts of the community in different ways (...) Two ways of counting the parts of the community exist. The first counts real parts only – actual groups defined by differences in birth, and by the different functions, places and interests that make up the social body to the exclusion of every supplement. The second ‘in addition’ to this, counts a part of those without part. I call the first the *police*, and the second *politics* (Rancière, 2015: 43–44).

In Rancière’s view, hegemony is constructed through *consensus*, *the distribution of the sensible*, and *the police*. The *police* have a specific meaning for Rancière, a logic dividing up the sensible, separating and excluding, and allowing for participation. It is an organization of what is perceivable by tying groups to specific modes of doing, places, and corresponding modes of being—*politics* attempts to disturb these arrangements by making a space for itself. *Politics* is rare, while what is common is the *police*, understood as actions and work to protect the status quo (Rancière, 1999).

Equality is not based on any essence but manifests in politics, which are disruptions, where people who are not counted for act under the presumption of being counted for—equality as a presumption based on the assumption of the equality of intelligence (Rancière, 1991). Rancière traces how scholars from Plato, via Marx to Bourdieu, have constructed the division of labor between people who can think and people who should remain with physical work—the subjects of knowledge and the objects of knowledge: “theirs is a virtue that has not changed since Plato’s day: the shoemaker is someone who may not do anything else than shoemaking” (Rancière, 2004: 58). This class separation of intelligence and entitlement is contrasted with his archive research revealing workers in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century writing poetry, philosophy, and polemics at night-time (Rancière, 2012). By producing illegitimate modes of thinking to legitimate its position (Rancière, 2004), the division of labor is supported by the opposition between voice and noise, between the political and the social, or private:

If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing him as the bearer of signs of politicality, by not understanding what he says, by not hearing what issues from his mouth as discourse (Rancière, 2015: 46)

For example, women were replaced outside of politics and considered incapable of taking care of common problems or thinking beyond private and immediate concerns. When women started speaking from a position that presumed equality, as a presupposition that could be demonstrated, it blurred the boundaries of noise and voice in the “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière, 2015). Thus, what was considered mere expressions of pleasure and pain could be understood as shared feelings of good or evil. This was done by manifesting a gap in the sensible itself, demonstrating a possible world where the argument would count as an argument. These acts are rare and spontaneous and involve dis-identification from exclusion, and a re-ordering of the senses, through a fracture in the hierarchy (Rancière, 2015).

### *Consensus as the end of politics*

Democracy is not an endgame for Rancière. Politics is always at risk of being swallowed by state power. *Consensus* is the end of politics, transforming politics into the police, annulling the dissensus, incorporating people into the social body, and asserting that there is a specific place for politics within the distribution of the sensible, that of the political community. Consensus is not simply an agreement, but an identity between the community’s political constitution and the population’s moral constitution, describing the community as an entity naturally unified by ethical values (Rancière, 2015: 108). No institution or organization can be political per se. Still, anything may become political if it gives rise to a meeting between the *police* logic and the *political* or egalitarian logic. “The time of a ‘democracy to come, is the time of a promise that has to be kept even though – and precisely because – it can never be fulfilled” (Rancière, 2015: 67). A political subject is a capacity for staging scenes of dissensus. This dissensus is not a conflict of interests, opinions, or values but a “division inserted in ‘common sense’: a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we see something as given” (Rancière, 2015: 77). Dissensus is to act as a subject that does not have the rights they have and have the rights they have not. Consensus means absorbing dissensus:

the attempt to dismiss politics by expelling surplus subjects and replacing them with real partners, social and identity groups and so on. The result is that conflicts are turned into problems to be resolved by learned expertise and the negotiated adjustment of interests. Consensus means closing spaces of dissensus by plugging intervals and patching up any possible gaps between appearance and reality. (Rancière, 2015: 79)

This logic of consensus works in ways that reduce dissensus to a distribution where each part of the social body gets entitlement to its share, finely molded to fit the diversity of groups and the speed of social changes. This involves shrinking political space. Alternative approaches to social problems like recovery, empowerment, and service user involvement have arguably become co-opted by the state (Cruikshank, 1993). Starting as attempts of dissensus, they become redefined as problems for the expertise to solve and molded into the finely molded consensus of empty rights.

Rancière has been criticized for giving little thought to the influence of capitalism, racism, sexism, and heteronormativity on the distribution of the sensible (Sparks, 2016; Žižek, 2004), yet formed a theoretical basis for postcolonial analysis (Tolia-Kelly, 2019; Pirsoul, 2017), combining with the work of Spivak and Freire (Galloway, 2012; Lewis, 2009; Jooste, 2016). His work has been criticized for over-emphasizing speech and improvisation, overlooking abilities, skills, knowledge, and organization (Olivier, 2015; Feola, 2014; Garrett, 2015). Within certain historical junctures, the service user has opportunities for voice, as shown by, for example, homeless protesters (Middleton, 2014; Mendel, 2011). However, they never speak directly for themselves; they speak under a costume collectively designed for themselves, from a mask painted upon their face, on a stage built by their interventions (Citton, 2009). For Rancière, descriptions that lock people up in certain discourses are as damaging as the objectification of people. Spivak's ethical engagement does not solve this, as it makes the philosopher the master of subaltern subjectivity. More than providing any blueprint for social work *dissensus*, the thoughts of Rancière posit essential questions about the part of social work within the *police*, its classification practices (Garrett, 2015), and the latter years, the relation between social work, normalcy, and political consensus related to COVID-19 (Garrett, 2021; Staller et al., 2021; Aaslund, 2021).

## Discussion

“Can service users speak?” is a provocative question to ask. Considering the insights from Spivak, the service user cannot speak in the capacity of being a service user. On the other hand, a Rancièrian interpretation could be that the service user cannot speak to the extent that intellectuals like Spivak or other parts of the police order claim she cannot (like social workers). They would probably agree, though, that the service user involvement discourse would not be strong enough to find a presumption of equality on which to base an inscription as subjects. It is universal and not particular enough (Laclau, 1996), relying on master words defined by the hegemonic theory and ascribing specific parts and modes for service user involvement (as well as ladders and cross-tables). Simultaneously, research has found service user involvement to be a vague, multifaceted, and fluid concept with several different understandings (Selseng et al., 2021). I will now discuss which challenges of representation and division of labor we can derive from the theories of Spivak and Rancière when analyzing service user involvement or engaging in participatory knowledge production.

### *Challenges for service user involvement*

Service user involvement is something that is given to you within specific places, times, and topics because you are a service user (Eriksson, 2018a; Carr, 2007). For the concept to make sense, it has to imply that the service user is a powerless creature (Cruikshank, 1993), a subaltern with no participation. As numerous scholars have pointed out, the discourse on service user involvement is apt to discipline service users into positions where they must



present themselves as active, autonomous, and responsible entrepreneurs to be eligible for help (Woolford and Nelund, 2013; Cruikshank, 1993).

The service user, as the shoemaker, is a necessary part of the division of labor, legitimating the position of the social worker, the hero that brings the voices of the service users to discourse. In fact, research suggests that social work students' future practice identities develop precisely in conjunction with their constructions of a service user identity (Skoura-Kirk, 2022), in the same way as the legitimacy of Plato's philosopher-king relied on the shoemaker (Rancière, 2004). Therefore, empowering processes are in danger of inscribing people as powerless subjects before the process of lifting their voices starts—a push into deep water and a helping hand. Their utterances are interpreted through their *psychobiography* and the hegemonic discourse (Spivak, 1996 [1985]) that service users cannot speak. This powerless subject remains in the relationship as a hidden trump card to be played if real politics or insurgence occurs. Suppose the voices stage unpopular opinions not part of the current consensus. In that case, they can easily be defined by their psychobiographies and accused of being intoxicated or unable to see beyond their own immediate needs (Loehwing, 2010), an utterance outside the distribution of the sensible, or noise (Rancière, 2015).

Even when the voices are not subject to discipline, problems occur. Discussions about representativeness in service user involvement have a long history and have even been argued to disempower service users (Beresford and Campbell, 1994). In light of our theorists, representation is always double and problematic because it is a portrayal, essentially a political representation of the intellectual instead, even when it aims for people to have a say in political processes (cf. *Vertretung* (Spivak, 2010 [1999])). Representation involves expelling surplus subjects and replacing them with an identity group (Rancière, 2015). Re-presentations (*Darstellung*) of people are framed as giving people political representation, a process accelerated by the interest of myriads of different organizations to associate with the participatory buzzwords (Cornwall, 2008). Rather than exploring conflict or competing interests, this re-presentation tends to portray service users and social workers as having coincident interests (Natland and Hansen, 2017; Eriksson, 2018b). This consensus redefines conflicts as ethical issues to be resolved, “plugging intervals and patching up possible gaps between appearance and reality” (Rancière, 2015: 79).

When the service users leave it to the social workers to assert their rights, the political subjects disappear. However, history shows potential for acts of dissensus and undoing of subaltern space through insertion into citizenship, but not necessarily through the discourse of service user involvement. Examples of this could be poor people's movements (Seim, 2016; Piven and Cloward, 1979) or homeless campaigns and protests (Rosenthal, 2000). Unfortunately, despite the values of social justice and liberation, social workers are not necessarily involved in processes where marginalized people act toward staging political disruptions or develop political subjectivities, or other contemporary social justice mobilizations for that matter (Zaidi and Aaslund, 2021; Holosko et al., 2018; Wendt and Moulding, 2016; Beddoe et al., 2020). Rather it seems to be multiple institutional, national, and personal barriers toward social workers supporting claims from marginalized people of insertion into citizenship. Even in an example when the dissensus



happened to disrupt social workers' own arrangement, it has been regarded as barbarian noise and violently suppressed. Only after criticism were the protesters given a space for speech within the consensus of social work from the benevolent social workers (Aaslund and Cear, 2020). As social work researchers, we risk misrepresenting acts of *Darstellung* as acts of *Vertretung* when reporting on apparently progressive projects with short-term positive outcomes.

### *Challenges for participatory knowledge production*

The problems addressed above bleed into and are possibly even more complicated when researchers invite the service user to participate in knowledge production. There are solid arguments for service-user collaboration in research, and the congruence of values between social work and participatory research is strong (Flanagan, 2020). At the same time, power differences remain within the relationship between researcher and service user, even in projects characterized by partnership or service user control (Tew, 2008; McLaughlin, 2010), and there are processes not easily captured by the categories in ladders and cross tables of service user involvement or participation. The moral argument for participation could obscure the practical implications of the projects (Doyle and Timonen, 2010).

The double and seemingly contradictory message of the powerless service user to be emancipated makes service user participation in research appear interesting, radical, or innovative, attracting funders, researchers, and progressive social workers to projects aiming at authentic voices of the powerless. Re-writing the service user, the researcher writes himself anew (hooks, 1989). Or as Spivak puts it, "The ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern is the left intellectual's stock-in-trade" (Spivak, 2010 [1999]: 27). Without the assumption that service users, people experiencing substance use problems, homelessness or other marginalized people, are unable to make their voices heard, protest, or participate, research into these processes would not at all be seen as that interesting or innovative. As researchers, we risk stereotyping and marginalizing the service users even more in the process of representing us as the radical emancipator. The participants are reduced to service users, objects for service providing, instead of persons (Nussbaum, 2009). These objects have no political voice themselves, but their utterances express their immediate private concerns (Ranci re, 2015).

Payment, titles of co-researchers, methodological training, and other inclusive acts can remedy some of the power imbalances in the division of labor. Still, there will always remain a gap between the intentions and the actual legal regulations (Ranci re, 2015). Like practitioners, most researchers assume a relationship of common interests, but as long as there is a prefix "co-," there is also a potential conflict of interests between participants and academic researchers. When such conflicts are redefined as an ethical issue to be solved, for example, through checklists, any acts of real dissensus—disrupting the police order based on a presumption of equality—risk being absorbed by the consensual idea of service user involvement in research. Such a consensus presumes a naturally unified entity of ethical values, which transforms political conflict into an ethical

consensus (Rancière, 2015). The service users become “token subalterns” as the academic community continues to be, as it were (Spivak, 1996).

These challenges are utterly amplified by troubles related to our use of master words of identity categories or social problem constructions in social work, leading to debates or conflict about who represents the authentic problem bearer or marginalized group (McLaughlin, 2009), an example being the common representation of ex-users in user involvement in substance use care (Selseng et al., 2021). Spivak claims that the power/desire/interest networks are so heterogenous that their reduction to a coherent narrative is counterproductive and essentializing. She says a persistent critique is needed (Spivak, 2010 [1999]). For example, Spivak’s point becomes evident concerning female participants and participants of color. In research about homelessness, these groups are largely made invisible in the discourse of homelessness and marginalized in the helping services (McCarthy, 2013; Baptista et al., 2017). Homeless persons without legal residence are often not counted at all. The idea that some persons could be involved in research to represent broader groups of these heterogenous networks is essentializing in a way that could jeopardize both the research outputs and the emancipatory aims of the project. Similar challenges of representation are also apparent when including service users in social work education (Aaslund and Woll, 2021). Spivak recognizes the need for *strategic essentialism* for political reasons in certain situations (Spivak, 1996 [1985]) but says the only access to the subaltern voice would be through efforts for the service user’s insertion into citizenship (Spivak, 1996).

### *So what to do then?—toward some preliminary solutions*

I will conclude by suggesting some possible paths to keep the question open and nurture the possibilities for speech and dissent, inspired by participatory action research and situating the researcher. They all have pitfalls, as all victories come with a warning (Spivak, 1996 [1994]).

The tradition of participatory action research of the southern hemisphere (PAR/VPC) was closely connected to social movements, adult education, and democracy, as opposed to the more consensus-oriented PAR in the US (Whyte, 1991; Glassman and Erdem, 2014). Freire postulated that freedom is acquired by conquest rather than by gift and that all inquiries should start with human action and the persons’ lived experiences. He argued that the risk of participatory research was not that the co-investigators adulterated the results but that the researcher shifted the focus from investigating meaningful themes to investigating the people themselves, turning them into objects (Freire, 2014 [1970]). Fals-Borda also criticized contemporary action research for relying too much on historical materialism and not on people’s actual conditions and highlighted emphatic involvement from the researcher, lived through direct participation in everyday life—Vivienca. Arguing that academic traditions exploited fieldwork and data, he proposed that there was no distinction between subject and object of truth in authentic participation and stressed learning from social movements and utopias, social workers, and theologians (Rahman, 2008; Fals-Borda, 1987; Glassman and Erdem, 2014). Fals-Borda’s concepts of subject–subject relation and justice for the underprivileged are close to the concept of organic

intellectual of Spivak (1996). By focusing on people's inquiry into their living conditions and local practice, this approach circumvents many of the common challenges of representation (though not all). There are no master words or broader identity categories at play when inquiring into your own living experiences, but of course, representation issues and power constellations within the group remain. Later PAR, inspired by this direction, aimed for the broadest possible participation and primarily concentrated on discourse and dialogue as democratic theory (Helskog, 2014; Gustavsen and Pålshaugen, 2015). The action part of PAR needs to be revitalized to challenge consensus and open positions to speak as if the participants had a voice (Rancière, 2004).

Inspired by Jackson (2016), Neumann and Neumann (2017) suggest two ways of going about situatedness in research. The first, reflexive situatedness, relates to a structuralist epistemology and has been discussed extensively earlier in this journal (Moore, 2016; Probst and Berenson, 2014; Iacono et al., 2021). Perspectives from Spivak and Rancière can help us in our reflexivity by deconstructing, twisting, and untidying our assumptions about service users and their abilities for voice and speech (Neumann and Neumann, 2017). The other way of going about situatedness is called analytical situatedness and speaks to a poststructural analytical position. This approach includes drawing on autobiography and situatedness to form value commitments that inform data production and method (Neumann and Neumann, 2015). In this approach, the question becomes how the researcher affects the people that are included in the research, not the opposite:

something that had before been considered doxic or normal, becomes problematized, with a view to understanding the consequence for some group of which the researcher may, or may not, be a member. The value commitment that situates the researcher is towards understanding what the effects of categorizing and representing things like this rather than that does to a certain group of people (Neumann and Neumann, 2017: 94)

In Neumann and Neumann's understanding of analytical situatedness, we will need research that produces situations that reveal how people do things. We need research that stage unusual, provocative, and rare speech acts from service users to see how people in power, researchers, and professionals respond to them—what they do. Rancière would call this dissensus.

In the end, however, there is no easy escape. Writing this, I am also inscribing service users into non-speakingness and myself as the giver of voice: "the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work" (Derrida, 1998: 24). Our best attempt is to keep the gap in consensus open by continuing asking the question: "Can service users speak?".

## Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank the research group PRAKT at OsloMet, especially Cecilie Basberg Neumann and Hilde Fiva Buzungu, for essential comments on an early draft of this paper.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Note

1. Conducted on August 5, 2022.

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