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REVIEW:

Migrant youth and politics: a workshop

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Abstract

On 9-10th September 2019 academics from universities around the UK met at Loughborough University to discuss working with children and young people, particularly those with a migrant/diasporic background. The workshop stemmed from the authors' research project on youth identity and politics in diaspora (www.youth-diaspora-politics.org) which has shown that young people in diaspora are, on the whole, politicised. All participants work/have worked with children and young people on themes of identity and politics and presented their work at the workshop. One of our main conclusions is that, despite the challenges, a stronger research focus is needed on young migrants and those in diaspora; their opinions, identities and experiences are important in their own right. After a short overview of each presentation, in the last section, we consider some methodological and ethical challenges we all shared and discussed, as well as some issues that need to be considered in the future.

Keywords: *working with children; young people; identity; diaspora.*

Introduction

In this review, we would like to use our research project and subsequent workshop to add to theoretical and methodological debates on the identity and politics of young migrants and young people in diaspora. Both the workshop and the project build on research which stresses the importance of listening to young migrants and young people in diaspora (Bak von Brömssen, 2010; Tyrell et al., 2013), their identities (Gardner, 2012; Reynolds and Zontini, 2016; Faas, 2015), politics (Fiddian-Qasimiyeh, 2013; Leurs, 2016; Müller-Funk, 2019; Baser, 2015) and the need to pay attention to their emotional, classed, ethnicised and gendered nature (Michail and Christou, 2016).

The research project

The research project (www.youth-diaspora-politics.org), funded by the Leverhulme Trust, explored how young Greeks, Palestinians and Jews in diaspora construct and articulate their identities and their views on politics and ways to be political in the UK. We spoke to young people aged 11-25, their parents and gatekeepers from each diasporic group. This was an exploratory study, in which we viewed the different groups alongside each other, in order to discover similarities and differences between them. The main findings reveal that young people are, on the whole, politicised, hold political views and often have a good understanding of what politics entails and how it impacts upon their own lives, their communities, countries and global relations. However, despite having

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strong opinions on issues such as climate change, young people felt that those in positions of power often did not listen to their views and frequently dismissed them because of their age. Overwhelmingly they did not trust politicians and wished that there were better ways to have their opinions taken seriously by those in positions of power.

The workshop

The research prompted us to devise a workshop which was generously funded by Loughborough University's Institute of Advanced Studies. The workshop took place on 9-10th September 2019. One of the main conclusions of the workshop was that a stronger research focus is needed on young migrants and those in diaspora; their opinions, identities and experiences are important in their own right.

The list of invited participants was as follows:

Professor Myria Georgiou, London School of Economics

Dr Daniel Faas, Trinity College Dublin

Dr Caitríona Ní Laoire, University College Cork

Dr Anastasia Christou, Middlesex University

Dr Bahar Baser, Coventry University

Dr A Erdi Öztürk, London Metropolitan University

Dr Elisabetta Zontini, The University of Nottingham

The discussions in the workshop centred around two main themes: valuing young people's voices, particularly the question of agency and the (new) spaces and networks that can potentially empower young people and help them to negotiate their identities and politics; and the complex interactions between the state and young people.

Valuing young people's voices, politics and the question of agency

Research has highlighted how children and young people are often silent and silenced (Spyrou, 2016) and that a critical discussion on how to better listen to them is needed. This is linked to the ongoing project of countering adult centrism in migration studies, which was an issue all participants felt was important. We also agreed that being a young migrant and/or in diaspora mattered when it came to identity and politics. The concept of 'transnational habitus', put forward by Zontini, highlights what sets children with a migrant background apart from children without migrant backgrounds – this has an impact on how young migrants understand the world around them and also on the role they can play in tackling global issues such as racism. As a result, as highlighted by Ní Laoire, it becomes crucial to explore how diasporic youth construct their own im/mobility trajectories and identities and understand the ways in which they engage selectively, and sometimes critically, with wider discourses of migration and mobility (Ní Laoire, 2020).

Despite the clear potential for young people to have a voice, to be heard and to be listened to, there are ongoing debates around young people's agency and participation (Gallagher, 2019; Holloway et al., 2019). During the workshop, participants outlined how agency and empowerment are certainly not a given, and that marginalisation and exclusion (still) need to be addressed. This was introduced by Christou who highlighted the ongoing realities of oppression and injustice that



young people face and presented education as a platform for resistance to help carve out alternative futures. This stresses the need to pay more attention to localised and grounded realities which dismantle myths and stereotypes of young people adopted by politicians, the mass media, and others in positions of power. In this context, Christou also discussed how youth agency can manifest itself in the form of 'connected civics', as young people come together to build shared contexts, and argued that more attention needs to be paid to young people's 'affective habitus', or the ways in which young lifeworlds are shaped by feelings.

We need, therefore, to look beyond assumptions around what constitutes the political for young people (Elwood and Mitchell, 2012). While discussing her research, Baser mentioned how young people she spoke with added 'likes' on Facebook without necessarily engaging with the content any further: does this constitute a political act? Similarly, when they attended political events, it wasn't necessarily to be political but sometimes it was a way to find friends, a community or even a spouse. For Baser, it was clear that some young people were actively 'choosing' a diasporic identity as a career. This can be seen as a political act in itself, but also demonstrates that there are decisions to be made, which have ramifications for identity and politics, for example, in relation to how migrant or diasporic parents raise their children, and what they teach them about their homeland and politics.

Therefore, rather than being unengaged and not having opinions, research has increasingly pointed out that young people connect, interact, engage and participate in different ways (Chrysochoou and Barrett, 2017). This was clearly demonstrated by Georgiou's ongoing Horizon 2020 project on young refugees. Georgiou shared her expertise on media and communications, outlining the role that smartphones play in the lives of young refugees by enabling them to navigate transnational journeys and have a voice in their new environments. She added that smartphones can also lead to the creation of virtual spaces of belonging and connection, where young people are able to set their own boundaries. This small window of potential agency comes in the face of increasing surveillance and digital control, where even young migrants feel the need to perform the role of 'the good migrant' as they struggle to deal with loss of dignity and other obstacles. By focusing on young people's perspectives, we can potentially see what particular challenges they face and what role new technologies can play in helping them feel empowered.

Young people and the state

There are increasingly complex relations between young people and the state, and although research has stressed the need to view young people as political (Skelton, 2010), their views are often ignored by the state. Ní Laoire stressed the need for critical interpretations of government discourses of young e/migrants. Her research, focused on an Irish governmental campaign to lure Irish emigrants back to Ireland, highlighted the tendency to infantilise and romanticise young people, erasing, in this way, the complex differences between them. This link between the state and young migrants has also been the focus of Faas' work. His research focused on different types of schools in Ireland, and on how different schools teach and approach religion and education. Through interviews with 10-11 year olds in focus groups, Faas found that young people were unhappy with how religious teaching was being delivered. Although this research went on to change government policy, demonstrating the value and importance of listening to, and acting upon, young people's voices, both Ní Laoire's and Faas' projects show how governments make assumptions, or simply don't consider, the views of young people.

Öztürk's research on Turkish nationalism, and the ways in which it has attempted to influence young people in diaspora, also contributed to our discussions around young people and the state.

Öztürk stressed the need for critical interrogations of the state, how homeland state policies and discourses are played out on a local and individual level, and also how they spread across borders and attempt to influence diasporas in negative ways (Öztürk and Taş, 2020). Öztürk talked specifically about the Turkish context and the government's attempts to use what they call the 'golden generation', who are able to bridge 'here' and 'there', to control how they are represented, what is taught in diasporic schools, and by selectively financing certain cultural events/projects. This is a reminder of the negative role that states can play in young diasporic people's imaginations and politics (Wilmers and Chernobrov, 2019).

Zontini added to the discussion by exploring the ways in which the macropolitical is played out in young people's lives and identity constructions. In her project on EU children in Brexit Britain, Zontini demonstrated not only the importance of context, but also, of timing; young people are acutely aware of 'big' and potentially abstract issues such as Brexit and how they have an impact on their lives and identities. Zontini was keen to stress the need to be mindful of the differentiated impacts of transnational connections and the role of place. She has also found that since the Brexit vote, EU children in the UK feel like they have to 'pick' an identity, and that there is less space for mixed or hybrid identities. It may be that Brexit is creating more nuanced ways in which young people are negotiating and performing their identities in different spaces. In turn, this stresses the need to explore the geographies of how young people practice their identities and politics (Kallio and Häkli, 2011).

Reflections and future directions

Our discussions highlighted the need to define what is meant by politics and the political. We all agreed that politics is everywhere, but that more research is needed on how young people view politics and act politically. In doing so, we may then be able to unravel the complexities around how young people are actually doing politics their own way, informally.

This final part of the paper will consider some methodological and ethical challenges we all shared, as well as some issues that need to be considered in the future. One of the main methodological challenges that any researcher working with young people faces is defining and justifying the age range of their participants. There are different views here stemming from the various ways in which research is conducted and where it takes place. If one has control over the context (such as in a school), it may be easier to find specific groups to participate. If, however, one is researching hidden or marginalised groups which are harder to access, then in order to speak to as wide a cross-section as possible, it may be advisable to work with a wider age range, bearing in mind that different age groups are likely to hold different views and are positioned differently.

In discussing the value of comparative research, there was debate about whether the best course of action is to compare like with like in terms of age, or to use more ethnographic inspired methods such as multi-sited ethnographies, enabling us to look at groups alongside each other rather than directly comparing them. We are then able to identify parallels as well as paradoxes and contradictions. We all agreed on the need for robust methods and analysis and also on the need for innovative and creative methods which are more participatory and better enable the co-production of knowledge.

One of the main challenges for the future in terms of the realities of conducting research with young people is the more recent role of university ethics committees, and the ways in which they dictate what can and cannot be done. This has meant ever greater restrictions on how research is



conducted and that increasing numbers of projects with young people fail to get the go-ahead or need to be changed. Whilst we recognise the need to safeguard academics and young participants, we fear that new researchers and PhD students will be discouraged from conducting research with young migrants.

Finally, we wish to re-iterate the value of conducting research with young migrants and those in diaspora, despite the challenges; as extreme nationalisms and right wing propaganda continue to rise, as academics we need to critically examine how politics can be used in negative ways, potentially creating hatred and division as we acknowledge that extremism and prejudice continue to exist within and beyond diasporic and migrant communities. To help counter that, and following research by Mansouri and Mikola (2014) on the ways in which young migrants in Australia 'step out' as they contest and negotiate belonging and politics, one might argue that young migrants have a key role to play. They, like other young people, use new ways to engage on and offline politically and in positive articulations of difference in a globally connected world (Leurs and Georgiou, 2016). However, young people 'on the move' have the potential to use their migrant and diverse backgrounds, as well as their transnational connections, to disrupt conventional forms of belonging (Reynolds and Zontini, 2016). In this way, although diasporic and transnational identities can be hard to articulate and deal with, they can also potentially create positive changes in not only normalising but also celebrating difference and diversity.

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