

# Chapter 12

## The Construction of Political Identities: Young Europeans' Deliberation on 'the Public Good'



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**Abstract** Analysing young people's willingness, their ability to participate in political action, and the discourses that they employ to do this, are clearly issues of the 'public good'. This chapter examines how many young Europeans appear to be constructing identities that include a globalised and/or European dimension, that coalesces around issues of political, social and environmental rights. This response to the changing political culture in Europe, the increased cultural diversity of the continent, and the growth of social media have led to a new generation that is differently mobilised for political activity, and which has a particular characterisation of what might constitute 'the public good'. The work described in this chapter developed from the work on young English identities described by Maylor in the preceding chapter, and focuses on the methodological issues of using less structured deliberative discussion group techniques, in a study of 29 countries in continental Europe. The young Europeans' discussions of the values of diversity, and how for many Europe was defined in terms of a culture of human rights values, have particular implications for educational practice in terms of political and civic awareness and the competencies needed for active participation, and for understanding how young people construct 'the public good'.

### Introduction

This chapter is in some ways rather different from others in this book. It is not directly about education policies: indeed, questions about educational processes were largely avoided in the fieldwork with young people aged between 11 and 19, although the findings have significant implications for schooling and curriculum policies. This is about learning and development that takes place outside the school

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setting and formal education. Unlike the studies in other chapters, it is not based on an institutionally funded project, nor does it focus on a simply-expressed set of research questions, or a particular 'need' for specific knowledge. The work it describes is not complete: as this book goes to press, fresh data is being collected that will add to our understanding of the issues with which it is concerned. It barely touches on issues in Britain/the United Kingdom, unlike mostly other studies in this book. But in other ways, the work and findings described in this chapter are very directly related to many of the core themes explored in this volume. What is the nature of 'the public good', as understood and expressed by young people? How do social scientists develop respectful and equitable methodologies of working with young people (particularly those who are still in education), in eliciting their beliefs and understandings? How do young people categorise the self and others, and construct meanings for such categories? The particular focus on how young people in Europe construct themselves in socio-political terms has wider implications for social classifications, on what young people see as 'the public good', and on the need for social scientists and policy makers to respect young people's concerns about the public good. There are many examples of young people taking on leading roles in commenting on global issues. The example of Malala Yousafzai was particularly prominent in the human rights area at the time of the fieldwork of this study, which had a particular focus on the political, but more recent events have shown other young people demanding an end to environmental degradation as a public good, as shown in the work of Greta Thunberg (2019).

Young people, and particularly their political understandings, have emerged as a specific area of study over the past couple of decades. 'Young people' are often generically dismissed in academic literature as apathetic and disengaged, and in popular literature as either the same, or as naïve and semi-deranged idealists. For example, Madsen Pirie and Robert Worcester have asserted that 'today's young people say they are not interested in politics and do not regard political activity as worthwhile. They know little about the institutions of government at various levels, and feel little loyalty to the communities of which they are a part' (Pirie and Worcester 2000, p. 35; see also e.g. Putnam 2000; Forbrig 2005; Calenda and Meijer 2009), while in some of the popular press, young climate activists have been dismissed as hysterical dreamers: Thunberg was, for example, described as 'a mentally ill Swedish child who is being exploited by her parents and by the international left' (Flynn 2019).

There is a danger that young people become reified as a sub-group, both as an object of study and as a group of people who have things 'done' to them. Many older people patronise the young, and treat them as a group that needs to be controlled, manipulated or guided in some way. Many of the interactions between young people and their elders take place in asymmetrical power relationships: parents guide and control their children (often through legal requirements to do so); schools and educators manage and constrain their learning (again, often through legislative constraints); other professionals with whom they come into contact often construct them as particular subjects to be managed and regulated (for example as patients, clients, those to be constrained, even as potential malefactors). Agents of capitalism

construct them as consumers, as perhaps particularly soft targets whose desires can be manipulated and fashioned (among other ways, through gender stereotyping). Politicians, if they notice them at all – young people generally not yet being voters – regard them as a group that needs to be instructed and directed about political processes, often with partisan objectives. The media contribute to these processes, for example through constructing the young as snowflakes, naïve idealists, uninformed about the ‘realities’ of life (and thus as a threat to the culture of the older consumers of their products). Generally, though not in every instance, society tends to construct young people as those not yet adequate to be citizens. They may have rights – for example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that ‘the child who is capable of forming his or her own views [has] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child’ (United Nations 1989, Article 12) – but these are limited, subject to adult consent, and not always available (the USA, for example, is not party to the Convention). Young people are aware of their subaltern status (Spivak 1988), which may on occasion affect their ability and freedom to communicate their feelings and beliefs: this makes researching their views particularly important, and sometimes difficult.

This chapter will discuss the ways in which researchers work with young people, and in particular how researchers engage in discussions with them about how they construct themselves as citizens, and the values and beliefs that they hold around this: what they see as ‘the public good’. The significance of this lies both in what these young people describe as their political priorities, which are a necessary component in constructing what is held to be the public good, and in establishing procedures that allow this to be expressed in a respectful and equitable manner, and that do not demean, infantilise or patronise them.

## Issues in researching young people’s views and identities

The research that forms the background to this chapter is a personal project, undertaken as a post-retirement project by the author, with largely personal funding. I had a long-standing interest in how young people develop as political beings, and how they construct political identities that appear to be multiple and flexible (Ross 1980, 1987). Much has been written about multiple identities: a variety of models have been used to characterise the plasticity of social construction, of political and locational identities, including Zygmunt Bauman’s liquid identities (2000), Oana Balescu’s description of identity as a palimpsest of successive configurations, each partially written over earlier versions (2009), and the way that Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and Patricia Collins (2015) use intersectionality to describe multiple identities as constructions that explain oppression and advantage. My particular interest was in the mechanisms by which this is done, and specifically in how political identities bridge a wide range of political structures: those of the immediate locality, the region or province, the state; the nature of European identity (largely,

but not exclusively, that associated with the European Union); and global identities. This was intended to be exploratory and descriptive: why and how do they do this? How do they manage the conflict that might seem implicit in this? How do they express themselves and operate in such contexts? It was not undertaken with particular theoretical objectives or models to test and explore. In its first phase (2010–2013), it explored how young Europeans in the states that had joined the European Union after 2004 (and some candidate states for membership) variously constructed their political and social identities in terms of their locality, country and Europe (Ross 2015), and in its second phase (2014–2016) this was extended to include the earlier European Union members (except the UK, Republic of Ireland and Greece) and the European Free Trade Association states of Norway and Switzerland (Ross 2019a). Further phases are projected, in the Ukraine and the South Caucasus and in the Balkan peninsula. To date some 29 European states<sup>1</sup> have been included, through deliberative discussions – which will be discussed in more detail below – with small groups of young people, aged between 12 and 19. The total number of groups was 324, with 2000 young people participating, in 104 locations.

### *Origins of the study*

The origins of this study date back to 2006, when I was a member of a research team that examined the understanding of identities by young people in England: this is partly described by Uvanney Maylor (Chapter 11, 2021). The research included a literature review of diversity and citizenship in the English National Curriculum which sought to ‘identify the type of contemporary British identities and values’ that were promoted in schools, and case studies in six diversely located schools which included twelve focus groups with young people (Maylor et al. 2007, p. 4). The study was to inform a review of how the teaching of citizenship approached ethnic, religious and cultural diversity across the curriculum, and whether there should be specific teaching of modern British social and cultural history (Ajegbo et al. 2007). Our study suggested that schools tended ‘to emphasise the discourses of culture and religion to the exclusion of other aspects of diversity (e.g. social and White British diversity)’ (Maylor et al., p. 5), and that “‘Britishness’ is often equated with Englishness (thus excluding other groups such as Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish), “Whiteness” and also with “Christianity”” (Maylor et al., p. 6). The project was commissioned by the English Department for Education, who stated that we

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<sup>1</sup>The countries in phase 1 (2010–2013) were Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus [Republic of Cyprus and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus], Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Turkey (all states joining the EU after 2004, and the candidate countries in 2010). Phase 2 (2014–2016) involved Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland (states that joined the EU prior to 2000, and the EFTA countries).

should examine 'Britishness', and specifically that we should use this term to examine young people's responses to it.

The focus groups showed how many young people, regardless of their ethnic background, saw themselves as having multiple identities. Identities were variously derived from the heritage of their parents/other relatives, where they were born, where they lived, their religion (if they had one), the languages they spoke, friendship groups, their personality and in some instances their hair, eye or skin colour. The following examples are all drawn from Maylor et al. (2007, pp. 89–95). At the individual school level, pupils in more ethnically diverse schools suggested that their background and those of other pupils were respected: 'People aren't racist here ... there's so many different ethnicities in the school, no one can get really picked on as being the odd one out, 'cos most people have got people to relate to' (White female, 15). The study required that we directly question the focus groups about whether the young people saw themselves as British. The presentation of a particular category meant that group members tended to focus particularly on this term. For example, one 14-year-old White girl said, 'I think British because my family comes from lots of different parts of England ... I don't know why I think more British because saying British rather than English joins all the countries together as though we are allies.' A 10-year-old girl of Asian heritage said, 'I think I'm a little bit British because I was born here, but my parents were born in Bangladesh.' In schools where students came from diverse backgrounds, there was a greater tendency to use multiple categories as descriptors: thus another 14-year-old girl described herself as 'a bit English, Danish, Spanish, Welsh – and Scottish as well,' and a 10-year-old boy in a different school said 'I'm not British'cos my granny's Japanese, my dad was born in Huddersfield and his dad was mostly a lot Scottish, so I'm half Scottish, a third English and a tiny bit Japanese'. Others sometimes sought to ascribe a single identity to an individual, like a 10-year-old boy who described a fellow pupil (not present in the group) as follows: 'he looks like he comes from India, but he's from England, so he's quite brown 'cos I think it's his dad that's English and his mum's a bit Indian. So he looks like he's Indian, but he's really English.'

This earlier study contributed to the design and scope of the work described in the rest of this chapter: it made me more aware of the ability of some young people to juggle complex and contingent descriptions of their identities, but also cautious of proposing particular categories to a group, or of using words such as citizenship or nationality, or categories such as English and British, that might be seen as directive or constraining. I also realised that the direction of the focus groups (necessarily) was towards experiences of schooling, and that respondents were sometimes reacting to our questioning as though we were in some way examining their learning.

Four issues became evident over the course of this earlier study, that have contributed to the framing of the study examined here. These were:

- the problems arising from projecting potential identity categories to participants, thus possibly framing and limiting responses;

- the perception that this might be a test of young people's knowledge, triggering an assumption that there were 'correct' answers;
- the issues in generating a narrative that develops respect and equity in the research interchange with young people, and avoiding any suggestion of being patronising; and
- the need to counter the assumption that there is such an entity as a 'public opinion' about issues of socio-political identities.

These are now addressed in turn.

### *Problems of categorisation*

The study examined here was intended to elicit young people's own constructions of identity, in a way that did not present them with preconstructed categories, but allowed them to put forward their own descriptions and definitions, anticipating that these might be multiple and would be contingent upon the context and nature of the discussion at the moment they were put forward. Identification with a nationality or a nation can be problematic. Walker Connor describes the term nation as 'terminological chaos' (1993, p. 112), and argues that the nation-state barely exists, and that the terms nation and state should not be used as though they are coterminous. Most modern states contain significant national minorities: elsewhere Connor (1978, p. 382) refers to a 1971 survey of 132 'entities generally considered to be states', pointing out that 90% of them had national minorities of a tenth or more, in 70 more than a quarter of the population were minorities, and nearly 30% had more than half the population as 'minorities'. The categories of nationality, citizenship and ethnicity are neither fixed nor predetermined, but dynamically constructed. Francesca Decimo and Alessandra Gribaldo (2017) refer to the:

census records, vital records, passports, identification documents, church records and medical research data [which] establish and grant materiality to the categorisations that inform our identities: beyond sex and age, they designate citizenship, nationality, lineage, religion, ancestry, health, language, ethnicity and race. (Decimo and Gribaldo 2017, p. 5)

Modern states *require* the classification of their populations: Anderson pointed to their need to distinguish between 'peoples, regions, religions, languages' in order to impose a 'totalizing classificatory grid' (Anderson 1991, p. 184). The Maylor et al. (2007) study outlined above required that the category 'British' be put to young people to elicit their responses. A Foucauldian model of the surveillance of the state (1977) was used by David Kertzer and Dominique Arel to explain how 'identity categories create ... a particular vision of social reality. All people are assigned to a single category, and are hence conceptualised as sharing, with a certain number of others, a common collective identity' (Kertzer and Arel 2002, p. 5; see also Nicoll et al. 2013). Instead of situationally-determined complex social linkages, the reification process of identity categories creates neat boundaries between mutually

exclusive groups (Kertzer 2017). The processes of enumeration and assignation through:

... body-counts create not only types and classes ... but also homogeneous bodies, because number, by its nature, flattens idiosyncrasies and creates boundaries around these homogeneous bodies, since it performatively limits their extent. (Appadurai 1996, p. 133)

The presumption that everyone will easily fit into such groups becomes increasingly unlikely as migration patterns in Europe are creating new diversities: more people with mixed origins makes it increasingly difficult to use these identity categories (Vertovec 2007). The design of the present study aspired to circumnavigate such limited categorisations by pressing the respondents to offer their own groupings and combinations. I therefore avoided introducing terms such as nation, state, Balkan, or Nordic, only using these when they had themselves introduced them (Ross 2019b). (Similarly, I did not directly ask about concepts such as values or rights, unless and until one of the group members had used such a word, when I could then ask them to elaborate on their understanding and use of such a term.)

### *Problems of 'testing knowledge'*

The second issue arising from the Maylor et al. (2007) study was that it could be difficult to avoid giving the impression that there were correct answers to the questions being put in the focus groups. Young people in a school context very often anticipate questions to be closed, because they are used to teachers (and many other adults) using questions to test or assess their knowledge (Alexander 2008; Hodgen and Webb 2008). They therefore expect a question to have a 'correct' answer that they are supposed to supply, and often feel obliged to find the 'right' response. Putting categories such as English or British to informants creates a presumption that these are the sort of responses that they are expected to provide; and this is further accentuated by asking the question in a setting associated with the testing of learning.

The *gruppendifkussionsverfahren* [group discussion method] offers one method of beginning to neutralise such assumptions. It has been described as 'an open interview, intended to let respondents develop a topic in their own language, in their symbolic system and their relevant framework,' so that analysis 'can avoid projecting into single utterances meanings that are not appropriate ... [we] learn more if this statement is put into a narrative context by the respondent ... in his/her own language' (Bohnsack 2000, p. 21, translated by Scheunpflug et al. 2016). This method is less structured and more open than traditional focus group techniques. Annette Scheunpflug et al. (2016) write of it as a method 'in which respondents can set the structures and contents of the conversation by themselves,' thus exploring 'knowledge stocks that are not located on the surface of conscious and clear explicable attitudes and values, but which are beneath the surface' (2016, p. 10). Wagerer (2018) refers to this as 'conjunctive knowledge ... implicit, action-guiding

knowledge ... based and acquired in fundamental experiences ... that groups of individuals share with each other' (2018, p. 92). My method was very similar to this, providing narrative-generating stimuli to initiate discussion. As described in more detail below, I began by exploring immanent issues – the topics, accounts and language that the group members use in their narratives – and only later move to ask exmanent questions – my own agenda of themes, thus giving the group the opportunity to develop structures that seem relevant to them.

### *Respect and equity in researching young people*

A third issue arises from the somewhat patronising approach to young people adopted by some older people, such as by Pirie and Worcester (2000, above). It was claimed by Davide Calenda and Albert Meijer (2009) that younger people are less interested in politics, not because of their age, but as a cohort effect: 'older generations now were more politically active as youngsters than young people are today,' and this 'can be attributed to a changing attitude towards politics ... related to a more individualistic, and even hedonistic, attitude' (Calenda and Meijer 2009, p. 879). But, in contrast to this, Maurice Devlin (2006) pointed out that many observers patronise individual young people as members of a group 'deemed to be idealistic and dynamic at the same time as ... irresponsible, threatening and given to excess ... Diminishing and patronising young people limit[s] their access to any equality of standing or status in society' (Devlin 2006, p. 3). Matt Henn and Mark Weinstein (2006) found that young people in the UK wanted political parties to reach out to them in more direct and non-patronising ways: political parties were described as cynical, not listening to young people, 'being fake with us' and making 'token gestures and talking down to us' (p. 527). In response to this, Sarah Pickard has recently developed a checklist of approaches to the study of young people's political participation 'that would produce more realistic results and analysis': these include:

- 'avoid being hermetically sealed in an academic speciality [and] ... favour interdisciplinary approaches';
- 'reject narrow definitions of political participation';
- use 'qualitative approaches with open questions that allow young people's voices and views to be heard';
- 'move beyond the political apathy analysis';
- 'acknowledge the nature of post-materialist values, everyday politics, lifestyle politics';
- 'avoid ... reductive and subjective binary classifications of political participation';
- 'observe intragenerational differences; and
- 'distinguish between intragenerational and intergenerational differences in political participation' (Pickard 2019, p. 80).



Most of these approaches were independently developed in the course of the research described here. This issue is essentially one of developing a discussion that produces a narrative of respect and equity in the research interchange with young people. The deliberative discussion process adopted in this study included all these strategies.

### *The concept of public opinion*

Much social research is designed to produce generalisable and reproducible findings. There is an assumption among policy makers that research can and should produce a discernible view of what the public sees as a desirable outcome, a majority consensus that represents a sense of a 'public opinion' that is relatively robust, and which can be broadly repeated with a relatively high degree of confidence. Pierre Bourdieu was critical of the assumption that opinions and beliefs could be statistically summarised; he argued that public opinion is effectively a construction of policy makers, who want transparent and resilient statements of what can be presented as public needs or demands:

Any opinion poll assumes that everyone can have an opinion; or, in other words, that the production of an opinion is within the reach of all. At the risk of undermining a naively democratic feeling, I will dispute this first postulate. Second postulate: it is assumed that all opinions are equal. I think it can be shown that this is not the case and that to combine opinions that do not have the same real strength leads to the production of meaningless artefacts. Implicit third postulate: in the simple fact of asking the same question to everyone involved is the assumption that there is a consensus on the issues, i.e. there is agreement on the issues that deserve to be addressed, to be asked. These three postulates imply, it seems to me, a whole series of distortions which are observed even when all the conditions of methodological rigour are met in the recollection and analysis of the data. (Bourdieu 1973, p. 1292)

He goes on to suggest that asking questions is in itself difficult, because it 'perniciously ... put[s] people on notice to answer questions they have not asked themselves' (p. 1297), demanding that those polled make choices between alternatives, none of which may reflect their own situation. Examining the kind of questions asked, he suggests that 'the great majority of them were directly related to the political concerns of the "political staff" [*personnel politique*]' (p. 1294). He continues

public opinion is an *artefact*, pure and simple, whose function is to conceal that the state of opinion at a given moment of time is a system of forces and tensions. There is nothing more inadequate to represent the state of opinion than a percentage. (Bourdieu et al. 1991 [1973], p. 1295, emphasis as in original)

He observed that not everyone has an opinion on every issue, that the simple summation of what opinions are expressed only produces 'meaningless artefacts' (*ibid.*, p. 1292), and that using an identical question with all respondents implies that there must be a consensus about the validity of the issue that is being addressed.

Posing questions is problematic: it ‘perniciously ... put[s] people on notice to answer questions they have not asked themselves’ (*ibid.*, p. 1297), and asks respondents to make choices that are not necessarily situated ‘as they really are in the real world in real practice’ (*ibid.*, p. 1304) of the respondent. Such ‘simple statistical aggregation of opinions’ produces ‘the artefact that is “public opinion”’ (*ibid.*, p. 1309).

Accordingly, this study was designed to uncover the *range* and *diversity* of opinion, rather than to arrive at a generalised summary of young people’s opinions. Philippe Rochat points out that ‘in academia, *a priori* claims of universality sell better than diversity, which complicates rather than simplifies matters ... This tends to relegate diversity to noise rather than as a primary object of study’ (Rochat 2010, p. 107). This study was *intentionally* noisy, reflecting the diverse populations of these countries.

## Towards a methodology

The methodology adopted in this study reflects many of the concerns, findings and proposals that are considered in the works of Bourdieu, the *gruppendifkussionsverfahren* writers and Pickard. Discussions were explicitly framed with assurances to the participants that there were no right answers, that disagreement was anticipated, and that any response would be accepted and valued. The objective was to establish an empowering rapport, so that discussion was, to a substantial extent, directed and paced by group members: they were to feel that it followed their direction, not mine.

I had, over a number of years before this study began in 2010, established personal contacts with many social science academics in over thirty European countries, which formed the basis of my set of collaborators, and I supplemented this with contacts through organisations such as the British Council and the German *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung* (Federal Agency for Civic Education). I worked with them to select locations of varying sizes and in different regions across each country: generally four to eight locations in countries with populations greater than 11 million, and two to five in smaller counties (though only one in Luxembourg). Each of my collaborators was asked to identify two schools or colleges in their area that would be willing to work with me, one in a working-class district, one in a middle-class district. In each school, I usually recruited two groups of six to eight young people. Schools were asked to select from the whole population of the school, not just the most or least able students, and where possible to include an appropriate representation of any minorities, and not only those who were formal citizens.

The young people participating were diverse: some 56% were female, about half had parents in working-class occupations. There were minority-origin young people in many discussion groups, reflecting the distribution of minorities in each country and Europe as a whole: by country of origin, 76.7% had both parents and grandparents from the country they were living in: of the remainder, 7.4% had at least one parent/grandparent from another European Union country, 8.4% from a European

country not in the European Union, and 7.4% from outside Europe (figures based on what was volunteered in discussion): these broadly correspond to the demographic profile of the 28 European Union states at the time (Eurostat 2015a, 2015b; Agafitei and Ivan 2016, p. 1). This was not intended to be a statistically representative sample, but a range of potential views across each country: from different regions, social backgrounds and cultural origins. Much empirical social science research draws subjects from a narrow base: Jeffrey Arnett (2008) estimates that 80% included in non-USA studies are drawn from psychology undergraduates in the capital city of a country. These are extrapolated as representative of the country (Rozin 2001). Within the constraint that the population being sampled was of young residents of these European countries (largely industrialised, democratic and comparatively rich), the recruitment process was designed to avoid the sampling limitations in cross-national studies (disproportionate numbers of White, urban, middle-class populations) criticised by Joseph Henrich et al. (2010).

Ethical approval was given by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee of London Metropolitan University in 2009 and 2014, and ethical decisions were based on the then current British Educational Research Association's Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. Consent was obtained from school principals, and written consent from the young people's parents (all of those under 16, and older in some countries) and the young people themselves. Letters to parents, in the national language, explained that I was 'making a small study of young people's ideas ... about how they feel as part of their community, region and country', and gave details of my local colleague for further information, and specifying that they could withdraw from the study at any stage. All names used are pseudonyms.

Some of the approaches employed to initiate discussions that produced this kind of dialogue were as follows:

- not to introduce leading terms, such as nation or state, but to use words such as 'country' (in Cyprus, I said 'on the island', rather than 'in this country');
- to only use terms such as nation, state, Balkan, or Nordic – or terms such as values and rights – after they had themselves introduced the term;
- questions to be asked in a transparently open manner (if someone said they were French, I might respond 'Why are you French?' – an unusual question, to which clearly no single 'correct' response could be anticipated);
- to accept all responses as valid (nodding, saying how interesting the response was), to maintain direct eye contact with each speaker (showing I was following them);
- to loop conversation back to earlier comments, when appropriate, following up specific comments and points made earlier (so that it appeared that the group was determining the agenda);
- to ask as few questions as possible (giving space for disagreement, supplementary comments);
- not directly to ask an individual to respond (not everyone replied to each question: this was a discussion, not a sequential interview); and
- to ask for elaborations, explanations and examples.

These stratagems – which include many of the approaches suggested by Pickard (2019, p. 80) – were not always wholly successful, but all but one group sustained a conversation for more than 30 min (the average was 45 min), and several lasted 90 min or more (the longest was 105 min). Most young people (about 95%) made more than a minimal contribution: two thirds could be described as fully participant for the entire session.<sup>2</sup>

The conversations were varied in focus and emphasis, and my questions changed in response, and in their wording, in order to maintain the mode as conversational rather than interrogatory. All were recorded and transcribed in full. While I had areas that I wanted to explore, I did not refer to this in the discussions, or stick to a particular sequence. Therefore responses cannot be numerically analysed in way: I can describe apparently significant trends, but not make quantitative claims, such as ‘67 per cent declared themselves to be European’ – and even had I put an identical question to every one of them, the statistic would still be meaningless. This is not to suggest that the conversations had no structure: I had my ‘instruments of construction’ (Bourdieu et al. 1991 [1983], p. 248). I held up a series of lenses, that allowed them to move between defining themselves (‘we’) and the other as being variously: a local group; a country-identified group (or of a mix of countries); a specific region area of the country; as a generational group; as European; or as global citizens.

## The processes of discussion

In this section, I focus on the processes that emerged in four particular kinds of events, which took place in most discussions, which generated material particularly pertinent for this chapter:

- firstly, the opening exchanges, and the way in which identification with a country was articulated;
- secondly, the discussions on the nature of the extension of human rights in areas such as the rights of migrants and LGBT rights;
- thirdly, the ways in which countries such as the USA and Russia were ‘othered’ as not having a European construction of human rights; and
- fourthly the ways in which the discussion of ‘being European’ often shifted from its instrumental practical benefits to the more abstract construction of an agency promoting rights and values.

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<sup>2</sup>Discussions were often in English, or largely English with my collaborators translating where necessary. About 15% were largely in another language.

### *Identification with a country*

I began by asking each person to describe themselves to me, in a few sentences. This usually allowed me to make some points about similarities, such as 'are you all Macedonian?', or 'x says she's Macedonian, and y says he's Albanian – what about the others?' This often produced a discussion of the range of reasons for having an attachment to a particular country (or countries), as with the following group of 17- and 18-year-olds in Odense, Denmark. Agnethe and Lilli both began by describing themselves as 'Danish girls'; Cæcilie said 'I feel – very Danish [laughs] – even though my grandfather immigrated from Scotland.'

- Julius All three of you said you were Danish, rather than European – so ... we are nationalists! [general laughter]
- Evald I also feel Danish, but my father, and my grandfathers, my grandmother, they emigrated from Germany, so I also feel some connection with Germany – but I feel mostly Danish.
- Hussein My parents came from Palestine, but I'm born and raised in Denmark – I don't feel as quite as Danish as the others, I feel more a bit of both – I feel more European than Danish.
- AR I wonder what it actually means when you say you 'feel Danish' or you 'feel mostly Danish'?
- Lilli I feel that it's mostly about the culture of the country. When I say I feel Danish it's not like I feel that I *belong* in this country, I could easily move to another country ...
- Cæcilie I think most of it has to do with the way I was raised – for example, my mum feels more Scottish than me, so she sort of raised me to be proud to *be* Scottish ...
- Hussein When we talk about different identities, people often mistakenly say that there is a clash of cultures, that the youngster doesn't know where to put himself. ... I see different cultures as being an advantage – you take the best of both cultures ... and make your own.
- Cæcilie I think our nationality is a way of expressing ourselves when we're abroad, but also at home, using it to feel secure ... you can tell people that I do this because I was raised in Denmark, because I feel Danish ... For example, I feel European as well, because we have some fair rules and stuff that unites us – even though we have very different cultures in the different countries in Europe.

Similar discussions were found in many groups, with a variety of explanations – ancestry, birthplace, language, culture, length of residence – or usually some combination of these. There were also more essentialist understandings of nationality: in another Danish town, Janko (M, 15 Serbian birth and origin) argued, 'I'm not Danish – if you want to, you can feel Danish if you're not born Danish – but I feel more like Serbian, because I'm Serbian, it's in my blood.' There were also, and more commonly, sharp rejections of any wish to be associated with a nationality: in Stockholm, Margreta (F, 16) was emphatic:

Swedish is nothing more than my passport says that I'm Swedish. I'm born here, and so were my parents – but to me that's not exactly relevant. I have Swedish citizenship, and

therefore I define myself as Swedish ... This nationalistic movement [*Sverigedemokratern*], and patriotism growing stronger – to me that became very serious, because I don't want to be whatsoever identified with them, I don't want someone to think that ... I am a nationalist, because of what's happening in Sweden and in the rest of Europe – it's become important to *not* identify myself with where I live, or where other people are from.

Others saw their attachment to the country as a matter of chance: in Sevilla, Sancho (M 14) used Ayelet Shachar's (2009) term, a lottery, to describe his citizenship: 'it's a lottery that you are born there – if you are born there and you love your country, and agree with the rules, and the people that are with you – then you are Spanish.' In Prilep, Macedonia, Lazar (M 18) was of the same view, and thought that he had had a poor deal: 'we are all Macedonians, but not by our choice – we are unlucky to be born here. I wish I was born in Denmark because here we are surrounded by poverty, by corruption, and the unemployment rate is high.'

### *The extension of human rights*

Many young people spoke of solidarity and of respecting others, often with reference to ethnicity, gender equality, sexual identities, social class and social welfare provision. Fairness was a very common theme, often expressed as dissatisfaction with current inequities in society: social values and human rights were constant and positive themes, often expressed generically as part of the nature of Europe (Ross 2020a). None of these terms was suggested or introduced by the author: all were volunteered by the young people themselves.

For example, in Lëtzebuerg, Anaïs (F 13) said, 'We have established Europe to have peace. The members are all democracies, and people want to have peace.' But there were also reminders of progress yet to be made: in the same group, Ludovic (M 14; father from Cape Verde, mother Luxembourgish) responded, 'in Europe there are not so many people that are Black, they treat me as though I have no value, as an African.' European social values were widely mentioned. In Amsterdam, Kawthar (F 16) said that 'people who live here have freedom of speech,' and Renaat (M 15) added, 'good justice – in Europe we have one of the best systems – a lot of other countries don't have an independent law system,' and he instanced American justice as harsh, and Chinese as government-controlled.

Equality was often referred to, but generally, it was the *lack of equality* that was the focus. In Austria, Elgin (F 16, Turkish origin) said, 'compared to Turkey or America, in Austria you can see the equality between the sexes, and there isn't as much racism. ... Austria's a good place, not the best, we could still improve, there's still racism and sexism ... [but] we care about equality and stuff.' In a school in Olsztyn with some Roma classes, the young Poles insisted that the *Romowie* (they used this term, rather than the more common derogatory *cygański*) were unfairly

stigmatised: Boženka (F 12) explained, 'everyone should be treated equally: we are all different, but we should all be treated the same.'

The rights of the LGBT communities, and prejudicial behaviour towards them, were a particular concern, more common in western Europe, but not only so: in Zagreb, Dragan (M 14) used the acceptance of gay rights as a marker of European behaviour, arguing that although Croatia was [at that time] about to join the European Union, 'we will never be on that level of European society, because here people ... don't accept differences – when Gay Pride was in Zagreb, people came to throw stones at them.' In Wien, Karolin (F 16) thought generally, 'our generation are more open to homosexuals – if you are, then you are, if you're lesbian, then you're lesbian.' In Malmö, Sarah (F 16) described coming out to her parents: 'my mother was like "Well, I hope you don't marry a girl, because that won't be acceptable!" at first, because when she was younger it was – well, not really a disgrace – but [now] no one cares ... It's just that they grew up in a whole different perspective, we've evolved since then.' But there were also some who were against LGBT rights. In Nantes, Ediz (M 15, of Turkish origin) said '[what] I don't like about France is that gay people can marry now.'

Many young people saw the response to the 2015 refugee crisis as a European Union matter, and thought it a positive and welcome example of European humanity and solidarity which increased their sense of European identity. The dominant narrative was that refugees should be welcomed and supported, as an obligation of implementing human rights. 'Europe' was frequently invoked as a champion of human rights. In Berlin, Samaria (F 18, of Indian origin) said Germany's policy was to be a 'humanitarian country, standing for European values, and appealing to other countries that are now fleeing from the responsibilities that they took on when becoming European Union members.'

But in the late summer of 2015 such feelings were being compromised by the actions in Hungary. The following comments were all made in September 2015. Jacinta (F 17) in Bellaterra said, 'I've been hearing about Hungary not accepting refugees from Syria for example – that's a big divergence from the European mindset, that we should help them.' In Madrid, Jaime (M 11) said 'now I feel less European, because almost all the countries of Europe collaborate over Syria, but some don't – all the continent should work in a group.' In France, Albane (F 17) in Paris said that European identity 'at this time is a very important question, because of the problem with Syria and immigration, when some countries of Europe close their borders. Yes, at this time I don't feel European,' and, in a rural school near Montpellier, Rosalie (F 14) said, 'in Hungary, they rejected the refugees – in France we try to welcome the refugees as well as we can.' Amandine (F 15) burst out, 'I feel less European – we can't be proud of what has happened – what Hungary is doing now is not human.'

### *Otherring countries that do not have a European construction of human rights*

The third process that became evident in the discussion of the nature of 'being European' came when discussion groups discussed particular countries that had other attitudes towards human rights and values of equality. These often arose spontaneously in references to the United States (and it should be noted that the following examples were all collected before Donald Trump was even a Presidential candidate).

The lack of social security was widely seen as creating inequalities. Jule (F 13) in Hannover pointed to 'things which aren't allowed in Europe are allowed in the United States – there you don't have to be medically insured.' In Dortmund, Rahel (F 17) spoke of 'our social insurance system, our medical insurance systems, and I think that's a big difference to the USA,' and Anke (F 15) in København spoke of Danish 'unemployment benefit – in the USA they don't have this security.' The existence of the death penalty in America was also often raised. In the Icelandic town of Akureyri, Katrín (F 17) described 'capital punishment [as] a civic rights issue – people who do really bad things should be kept in prison for life, but they shouldn't be killed – I don't like that about America, and that's what I like about Europe, the death sentence isn't allowed.' In the Italian town of Frascati, Coralie (F 14) said that in Europe 'there's no capital punishment – in the US they are killed. In Europe, they are kept in prison for a lot of time. For me, they have the right to live, one of the most important rights,' and Rose (F 17) in Lëtzebuerg was critical that 'it seems normal that everyone in America has a gun, and that they have the right to shoot.' Environmental issues were another area of divergence between European and American values. Flemming (M 17) in København observed, 'there's a lot of people in Europe who feel that we have to take responsibility, while the US doesn't – global warming and stuff like that, Europe has rules and laws about CO<sub>2</sub>, Europe has more feeling of responsibility to the world than most other countries.'

Russia was another country seen as having a very different attitude towards democracy and rights that the dominant European ethos. I sometimes, towards the end of a discussion, asked a group how they might react to the idea of a [highly hypothetical) Russian application to join the European Union. This was often responded to in terms of Russia lacking certain 'European' attitudes towards democratic norms. Thus in Lisboa, Rufino (M 16) said, 'Russia is a dictatorship, and most of the European countries are democracies ... so I wouldn't think that they could be part of Europe,' and in Bologna, Eurialo (M 16) said, 'it is unacceptable that Europe should let Russia in: [they are] very backwards in terms of civil rights, too strong a state, a centralised state'. In the Danish town of Slagelse, Nelly (F 15) focused on the particular responses in Russia to LBGT rights: 'If Russia was allowed to join the European Union I would be outraged ... they don't have the right to be homosexual – they can be arrested for it, actually. It's not in the laws of all [European Union] countries yet ... It is very important that a country in the European Union has human rights, the basic rights to be yourself.'



### *The shift in discussion of 'being European' from instrumentalism to an agency for human rights*

The discussions ranged across what it meant to be European: were there particular characteristics of such an identity? These discussions often began with very practical and instrumental reasons: the freedom to travel, study and work were often cited, particularly in the post-2004 member states: Afina in Oradea (F 15) wanted 'to go to study somewhere other than Romania – in Austria, for example,' and in Presov (Slovakia) Ladislav (M 16) said, 'I want to study abroad – I think the quality of universities in western Europe is better.'

But as many discussions continued, there was often a distinct turn towards a construction of Europe as something fundamentally much more than this. The context of this turn was sometimes contingent on comparisons made, as in the preceding section, with both more authoritarian regimes and with more neoliberal states such as the USA. These othering processes, which led to a more tautly defined positive sense of 'being European', centred on the recognition of a distinctive and shared approach to human rights. In Brussels, Loes (F 17) was an example of this: she both talked herself into being European, and then was further moved on by the comparisons she made. She began 'I also don't feel European – I guess that we have advantages in that it is easier to travel, and I like that ... so it is easier, and everything is more open.' Five minutes later in the discussion, she observed, 'I think that Europe has this common goal ... to make Europe a better place, make sure that everyone has equal rights. I don't think that we are there yet.' Then a colleague suggested that President Putin did not appear to be very democratic: Loes's response was almost explosive:

not very democratic? I think Putin is not democratic *at all* – the complete opposite. It's the complete opposite of what we want to do with the European Union – if we let him have more power in the European Union, then that's the end, all people who are not straight will be prosecuted, a lot of people who aren't in the right place, in his opinion, will just be moved – it would tear the European Union apart.

In Lëtzebuerg, Amaury (M 17) began by saying, 'the greatest good that the European Union gave us is the free circulation – this suppression of the borders is a gift.' But minutes later he reflected further: 'It's also a thing of values, because in the European Union we should share all the same values – democracy, and liberty, liberty of expression, and that's also what the European Union stands for,' and then, a few minutes later, 'I think the main right is democracy – we see now in Poland there was a big reaction by the European community because their liberty of expression was partly suppressed. We have this sense of democracy in common, because there is this reaction to it.' This reference was to the European Commission's announcement, 2 weeks earlier, of a review into the new right-wing Polish Government's possible violation of the standards of rule of law and the proposed replacement of members of the constitutional court (Pop 2016). For Amaury, the European Union's significance shifted over 15 min, from enabling his passport-less

travel to being a power with the potential to sanction anti-democratic tendencies in a member state.

It was not only that human rights had been established in Europe, but that the European Union was active in ensuring that they were upheld. In Lille, there was a long discussion on how rights had to be maintained, peppered with references to recent examples and violations. Laurence (M 16) raised the attempt by the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, to re-introduce the death penalty in Hungary, and how the European Commission had frustrated this: ‘that’s a nice aspect of Europe, that he had to abandon it because ... he would have been sanctioned economically by Europe.’ Blaise (M 15) then recalled European diplomatic sanctions in 2000 against the Austrian far-right politician, Jörg Haider, leader of the *Bündnis Zukunft Österreich*: ‘he took away some rights of homosexuals as unmarried couples – but the European Union was there to restrain him – it’s like a dog leash.’

## Some conclusions about the process

These examples show how young people were, through their discussions with each other, making statements that suggested a sense of what they considered to be the public good. Taking time to discuss, in depth, issues about society and politics that they would like to change, allowed them to do much more than exchange ideas, but to refine and extend them, synthesising and exploring, in a process that allowed deliberation, yet did not demand a conclusion or an agreement. But the learning that is addressed in this study was very largely learning that took place outside of formal educational settings. While schools and colleges were used to recruit the participants in each group, most discussions did not feature school-based activities. At the end of each discussion, I would ask if they talked about ‘the kind of things we’ve been discussing’ with the friends, or their parents, or their teachers. Teachers, and school activities, were in a poor third place in the great majority of discussions (Ross 2020b).

Four issues about doing social science research with young people were raised early in this chapter, and the discussions of the methodology and the findings of this project that followed this have attempted to suggest some resolutions to these problems. Firstly, there was a fairly determined effort not to suggest categories, or even types of categories, to the young people, but to let them propose and define their own. ‘Fairly determined’, because on transcription I discovered that occasionally I had slipped, and introduced some prompts: for example, in three of my 33 discussions in the Balkan states of Croatia, Macedonia and Bulgaria, I did introduce the word ‘Balkan’. But the categories used in nearly all cases were those selected and discussed by the young people themselves. There was an explicit effort on my part not to frame questions in a closed style: in particular, I tried to make many questions responses to what had been raised by the young people themselves. I did, towards the end of many discussions, ask a direct question about their potential reaction to a neighbouring state joining the European Union, selecting a state that I surmised

(often from their earlier comments) might be viewed with some antagonism: but I always concluded this by asking if they thought this 'might be a good thing, a bad thing, or not matter' – admittedly a rather crudely defined set of alternatives, but succinct and intended to indicate that any or no response was acceptable. And finally, I was always prepared to accept, without commenting or applying pressure, that the young people might have no views on an issue, or none they were prepared to advance. Yet in many cases the issues they discussed were relevant, wide-ranging and significant – but not always unanimous. Not everyone wished to participate on every issue discussed; some views were quickly abandoned in the face of others (more strongly held, or more strongly argued), but there was no attempt to combine opinions, or to reach a consensus.

As has been noted above, Bourdieu (1973, p. 1292) suggested there was no resolution of what their agreed opinion might be.

This approach was supposed to be inclusive, in that all were able to contribute, and most who wished to contribute (the great majority) were able to do so, though inevitably not always at the precise moment they may have wanted to intervene. In particular, I adopted a very catholic approach to accepting all comments as being relevant in some way: none were dismissed; none were corrected on matters of fact unless I was specifically asked if a factual comment was right or not. This happened fairly rarely, and I usually was either able to give a crisp confirmation or correction, or to say that I didn't know. I was, rather more often, but not frequently, asked for my opinion on an issue: I always stressed that I was interested and wanted to hear their views, but would discuss my views with them afterwards, if we had sufficient time (there usually was). In particular, it was often possible to encourage critical disagreements: I stressed at the outset that I expected disagreements, and it was gratifying to note just how often someone said something like, 'I must disagree with that ...'. I did not lay down initial specific rules of discourse, but there was no occasion, in any of the 324 discussions, where exchanges were not equitable and respectful of each other (Pickard 2019).

Pickard's checklist of ways to approach young people's political participation (2019, p. 80) also encapsulates much of the approach that was employed. For example, I avoided references to particular academic disciplines, such as politics or economics. I found I could not avoid the word 'society', but did not use sociology. Sometimes they would introduce these words – economics more than politics – but not often, with the exception of my closing question, when I would ask if they often discussed 'things like this': at this point, a number of groups spoke about the infrequent times that they discussed 'politics'. I made no narrow distinctions about the nature of political or social action, and had no need to make assumptions about their political apathy, though I did sometimes ask, in response to their listing of political problems, what they could do about them. I also prompted discussion of intergenerational values and differences: there were many other such issues discussed that are more fully reported elsewhere (Ross 2015, 2019a).

In short, it did not seem difficult to create the conditions for young people – largely of school age – to discuss, articulately and with confidence, contemporary political issues in terms of their own values, beliefs and experiences. They did not

agree on issues, within or between groups, but could deliberate and debate differences. Though the purpose of these discussions was not to arrive at a notion of what young people held to be ‘the public good’, it is very clear that individually most had a clear conception of what some of the elements of ‘the public good’ might be. The dominant discourses have been sketched in the extracts given in the chapter, but there were other, less widely-held positions: the significance lies not so much in any of the views themselves, but that they were held and expressed in terms of values that they thought important, and were seen as public values that were held to be ‘good’ in some way. The troublesome point is that these views are infrequently heard, and in particular, that they are so uncommonly heard in the context of the school: something would appear to be dysfunctional. Why? In terms of the general thrust of the essays in this book, it would seem important to acknowledge that any determination of what might be construed as a good and worthwhile education ought to firstly include and recognise young people’s own values and views, and secondly to include activities that encourage the processes by which young people can freely articulate and deliberate their views on social and political issues.

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