**Political Identities Narrative**

**Introduction**

The nature of young people’s political identity has become an increasingly important and contentious issue in the UK. In recent major electoral events, such as the EU referendum of 2016 and the General Elections of 2017 and 2019, age has emerged as the most significant social division in British politics. It has been recognised that a substantial amount of this emerging generational divide can be accounted for by the changing values, attitudes, and identities that are being expressed by young people.

The current generation of young people in the UK represent an increasingly diverse group comprising a wider range of intersecting identities than ever before. Significant political events such as Brexit, austerity and devolution (both regional and national) have contributed to making young people’s identities increasingly relevant, sensitive and politically contentious. The currently evolving Covid-19 crisis and the Black Lives Matter protests have further increased the salience of political identity in UK politics. These events have highted the crucial issue of agency with young people finding that their identities are increasingly politicised whether they like it or not. To the extent that in the increasingly polarised atmosphere of UK politics and society age itself is in danger of becoming a form of contentious political identity.

In this context, there is evidence that young people may be thinking about, and constructing, their identities in different ways from previous generations. The current generation of young people may be engaging with identity as a more fluid, flexible, and dynamic concept and are increasingly aware of its political nature. There is evidence that young people’s political identities are becoming wider and deeper in that they are becoming both more varied and more important to their social and political engagement. This has clear implications for policymakers and those involved in delivering youth services. As identity becomes a more important and contentious issue for the way in which young people are perceived, it is critical that youth services provide space for the expression, development and moderation of these identities. Youth work provides a vitally important safe space for young people to explore issues of identity within a supportive environment free from societal and peer pressure that exists in other aspect of their lives.

However, too often popular discussions around young people’s political identities focus on crude binary divisions that essentialise young people as a unified group. Not only does this often misrepresent the range of identities and values young people possess, it also fails to acknowledge the rich, diverse, and complex nature of the process through which young people’s identity develops. There is a lack of consideration of the social environment and formative experiences that are critical for producing these identities and the role that youth services play in this process. Overall, these tendencies can contribute to the stereotyping of young people and to their political concerns becoming marginalised.

This project intends to address these issues by ensuring that young people’s voices are at the centre of our research in order to address the following key questions:

-Which identities matter to young people?

-How do young people’s identities become ‘political’?

-What are the most important factors in the development of young people’s political identities?

-To what extent are political identities imposed onto young people?

-Can regional allegiances serve as a unifying identity for young people?

-How do youth workers and youth organisations perceive young people’s political identities?

-What implications do young people’s political identities have for the delivery of youth services?

**Definition of Political Identity**

Identity is a difficult concept to pin down. Broadly it refers to a set of values, beliefs, behaviours and priorities that an individual expresses through identification with a wider collective group. These identities can have political and non-political components. For example, people may define themselves as Scottish and associate this with a specific set of allegiances and behaviours that are not necessarily political such as supporting Scotland in sporting events or observing Burns night festivities. More contentiously, they may consider certain values and allegiances to be fundamental to their specific identification as Scottish. Identities have an aspect of self-definition, with some people associating an identity with certain values and priorities that others do not. This is where identities become clearly political. For our Scottish example, this could be the difference between someone believing that ‘being Scottish’ means supporting Scottish Independence and someone who entirely rejects independence but still considers themselves Scottish.

A political identity is an individual’s values, belief, behaviours, and priorities expressed through identifying as a member of a collective political community. The definition of political community is broad and could be based on political, social, economic, or cultural allegiance. Not all forms of personal identity are political, but most have at least some potential to become political. Whether they do or not often depends on the social and political climate at any given time and the attitude of the individual themselves. Previous research has demonstrated that political identities are formed and set during the period in which young people transition to adulthood. Their initial experiences of becoming aware of the wider adult world and where they see themselves within it are critical for defining lifelong political identities. Young people have therefore always been the driving force of political value change in society.

It is critically important to our research that we do not impose any specific model of political identity onto young people. We are concerned with exploring how young people develop their political identities and the relevance this has to their engagement with services. To a large extent, the young people themselves will be defining what they understand as political identity. The standard approach identifies 3 distinct categories of identity;

1. ***Overtly Political Identities***. These are identities which are universally recognised as having clear political implications linked to long-standing divisions in UK society. They are examples where the group the individual is identifying with is definitively political. The political relevance of these identities has been long-established, and the values attached to these identities are often politically contentious themselves. This is likely to include, among others, national identity, class identity, ethnic identity, and political party identity.
2. ***Non-Political Personal Identities***. These are identities which are very unlikely to become political in the near future but are still important to an individual’s self-identity. They are examples where the group the individual is identifying with is definitively non-political. They are most likely to take the form of identifying with a collective group associated with cultural or commercial consumption. For example, supporting a football club, expressing allegiance with a Youtube influencer or associating with a hobby group.
3. ***Potential Political Identities***. These are identities which are not automatically regarded as political but have the potential to become so. They are examples where individuals often disagree about whether the group they are identifying with is political or not. As a result they cover a broad range of identity types. For example, religious identity, regional identity, age group identity, workplace identity, gender and sexual identity.

An important part of our project will be exploring whether this categorisation is representative of young people’s understanding of their identity and whether it varies across different parts of the country. Being guided by young people themselves (as opposed to imposing a particular model) allows us to develop a more complex, nuanced and realistic map of young people’s identity. This is also critical for ensuring that youth services consider how they can support the development of young people’s identity in a variety of socio-economic contexts.

**How Identity has Changed**

Previous research has demonstrated that there has been a quiet revolution in the development of personal identities in Western Democracies over the last 30 years. This change has been driven by successive generations of young people transforming the way in which they construct their identity in response to a period of profound social change. Individual identities have increasingly transformed from being fixed, stable and unified to being fluid, changeable and diverse. It has been argued that this has been complemented by a substantial change in attitudes towards identity itself. A communal consensus around identity being automatically assigned to an individual through their place in a fixed social structure has been increasingly replaced by assumptions that individuals have the right to develop their own specific identities.

However, other studies have demonstrated that there is considerable inequality in young people’s capacity to develop their own identities. Those from poorer and more marginalised sections of society are less likely to feel that they have agency in constructing their identities and more likely to perceive that their identity is imposed on them by wider society. An issue which has been bought into sharp focus in the recent Black Lives Matter protests. This is why it is important that our research focuses on the different ways young people may construct their identities as well as the type of identities they are expressing.

Political identity has mirrored this transformation. Previous research has demonstrated that political identity has gone through three distinct periods of change. It also clearly demonstrates how critical young people have been to these transformations.

1. ***Fixed and Stable Political Identities***. Early research into individual’s political identities from the 1950s and 1960s focused on how they represented a stabilising factor in politics. Political identity was considered to be connected to an individual’s position within the social structure. It was directly associated with class identity which underpinned political attitudes and allegiances. A direct link was drawn between an individual’s class identity, their attachment to a political party and their political attitudes. Researchers demonstrated that these identities were formed in late adolescence during transitions to adulthood and were very rarely adjusted as individuals aged. National allegiance was also considered a key component of identity construction but in the relatively homogenous societies of the time was considered relatively politically uncontentious.
2. ***Two Dimensional Political Identities***. From the 1970s onwards researchers began to uncover a new set of political values that were not automatically linked to an individual’s class identity. Political identities emerged that were more strongly associated with people’s individual cultural and social attitudes. The fixed nature of economic class-based identities began to be perceived as less important. It was recognised that non-economic and non-class based political identities could be just as important. This period is often associated with the growth of ‘postmaterialist’ values, liberation campaigns, the modern feminist movement and ultimately the emergence of concept of political ‘culture wars’. Changing social conditions and increased educational opportunities for young people were recognised as the driving force of this shift in values. Researchers had demonstrated that young people from the 1970s onwards were increasingly more likely to prioritise their political identity according to their personal cultural values rather than their position within the class structure.
3. ***Multi-Dimensional Political Identities***. More recent transformations have shown that political identities have now become more diverse and complex. Individuals now increasingly reject singular political identities and are more likely to emphasise a much wider diversity of identities. This has produced a transformation in the way in which individuals develop their political identity. They are more likely to identify with multiple political identities and move between these at different times. At the same time, due to the complexity of contemporary societies a much wider range of identities have become politicised. The relevance of a political identity has therefore increasingly become an issue of self-expression and its significance is far more dependent on the contemporary political context. Young people are increasingly challenging the assumptions that underpin the notion of political identity itself typified by current debates around gender and sexual identity.

The above summary provides a useful explanation of political value change and young people’s role in driving this. However, it is equally important to recognise that the different ways in which young people develop their political identity overlap. There is evidence to suggest that young people from different backgrounds construct their identities in different ways and this is strongly linked to increasing diversity and social inequality. Increased agency in the construction of political identity is associated with more privileged and highly educated groups. So, while it is unsurprising that young people from different backgrounds would express different political identities, they are also likely to develop those identities in very different ways as well. This can produce significant division in young people’s attitudes and preferences for social and political engagement. It is what makes political identity a particularly important and challenging issue for those designing youth services.

**Why Study Young People’s Political Identity**

Central to this transformation in political identities has been a change in the way young people construct and express their identity. An assumption that unites researchers from all eras is that political identity formation does not occur in a vacuum. It is linked to political context, life experiences and opportunities that young people experience in the critical formative years of transitioning to adulthood. It is also connected to the socialisation experiences they have with other young people during this time. Given the relatively tumultuous political experiences they have lived through it should therefore not be surprising that the current generation of young people would have a more complex approach to developing and expressing political identities.

The current generation of young people in the UK is the most diverse cohort ever and this is expressed in the increasingly complex relationship they have with identity and the significance these identities have to their lives and expectations. In addition to this their lives have been shaped by their varied experiences of austerity which has impacted some groups of young people more negatively than others. They have also had to deal with an increasingly polarised political culture in the UK that has resulted in age itself becoming a key political divide. This is likely to have had a profound impact on both on the range of political identities they express and the relevance these identities have for their engagement with society.

Identity formation itself has become an increasingly contentious area in both the way young people interact with each other and their perception of the services they engage with. Changes in the way in which young people develop and express their political identities can produce significant generational tension and misunderstanding especially between designers and users of young people’s services. The emergence of multiple inter-sections and fluid identities and the increased sensitivities attached to this represent a specific set of challenges to those who work with young people. This makes it increasingly important that young people can see their identity reflected in their engagement with youth work. Therefore, the aim of this research project is to ensure that young people feel they have the necessary space within youth services to discuss and reflect on issues of identity and that this should be a more important consideration when designing services.

**Relevance of Political Identity in Youth Services**

It has been recognised that a critical aspect of youth work is providing spaces and opportunities for young people to explore and develop their own identities. As stated above these identities are complex and plural. Young people often find the need to question their identity through their adolescence and youth work has a key role in fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance of this process during what can be an isolating time. Young people will express their identity through their everyday interactions, the way they speak and dress, and through their words and behaviours. Young people often feel a strong need to share their identities and experiment with different forms of expressing them.

Youth work supports young people to explore and understand their identity and find a sense of belonging by:

* Offering space where young people can be with others who share their experience, i.e. whether that be community of interest, a protected characteristic or of a common life experience.
* supporting young people to think about what makes up their identity and how they think other people see them.
* supporting young people to discover their personal values, principles and preferences.
* valuing each individual and their differences.
* supporting young people to understand their prejudices and value diversity and equity.
* Creating safe spaces and groups where oppressive behaviours and views are challenged.

Youth work faces a specific challenge in taking responsibility in supporting young people to navigate an increasingly contentious and polarised environment for constructing political identities. At a time when young people are increasingly at the forefront of the contentious politics of the emerging ‘culture wars’ youth work can offer a positive and unifying force. Youth services need to develop strategies for constructive engagement and expression of young people’s identities and make it a more central part of their work. This project aims to develop policies and best practice that will enable youth workers to moderate the sensitive territory of identity politics and develop common ground that will allow young people from very different backgrounds to engage with each other constructively on political matters.

Young people’s identity should therefore be central to the development of youthwork policy and services. It is important that practitioners understand transformations in how young people relate to their identities and how this may impact their engagement with youth services.

**Contribution of the Research**

The project aims to improve understanding of the role that youth services have in facilitating the development of young people’s political identities with the aim of developing a clear set of recommendations for youthwork practice in this area. In doing so it aims to improve understanding of the range of political identities expressed, the processes through which these identities are developed and how they relate to relate to young people’s experiences with youth services. It is important to us that the project explores the wide diversity of young people’s values across different parts of the UK and recognises the increasingly multi-faceted nature of young people’s political identity. We also aim to explore the extent to which different groups of young people may have more agency to develop their own political identities and to identify ways in which youth services can provide a positive space for young people who may feel more constricted in their agency. In doing so, we aim to make a positive important contribution to the contemporary understanding of young people’s political identity at a time when, often through no fault of their own, young people find their identity being an increasingly contentious socio-political issue.