

# ‘Everybody’s Entitled to Their Own Opinion’: Ideological Dilemmas of Liberal Individualism and Active Citizenship<sup>†</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Conversational interview accounts were used to explore everyday understandings of political participation on the part of young white adults in England. Analysis focussed on dilemmatic tensions within respondents’ accounts between values of active citizenship and norms of liberal individualism. Respondents could represent community membership as engendering rights to political participation, whilst also arguing that identification with local or national community militates against the formulation of genuine personal attitudes and rational political judgement. Respondents could represent political participation as a civic responsibility, whilst also casting political campaigning as an illegitimate attempt to impose personal opinions on to others. Formal citizenship education did not appear to promote norms of political engagement but rather lent substance to the argument that political decision-making should be based on the rational application of technical knowledge rather than on public opinion or moral principle. In conclusion we question whether everyday understandings of responsible citizenship necessarily entail injunctions to political action. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

*Key words:* political participation; voting; political expertise; public opinion; citizenship; ideological dilemmas; national identity

## INTRODUCTION

The citizens of a liberal democracy are to regulate themselves; government mechanisms construe them as active participants in their lives . . . [the] citizen subject is not to be dominated

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in the interests of power, but to be educated and solicited into a kind of alliance between personal objectives and ambitions, and institutionally or socially prized goals or activities (Rose, 1990 p. 10).

### *Social psychology, citizenship and political subjectivity*

The question of how individuals come to be positioned and to understand themselves as the subjects and objects of democratic governance arguably represents the core problematic of the social sciences. Nikolas Rose (1990, 1996) suggested that many of the central concerns of social psychology—such as attitudes, identity, the relationship of the individual to the group—essentially relate to questions concerning the possibilities for, and impediments to, democratic citizenship in modern societies. Early work in social psychology often engaged explicitly with contemporary debates concerning public opinion and participatory democracy (e.g. Allport, 1937; Bogardus, 1924; Wallas, 1936). However, current theory and research rarely address questions relating to citizenship directly (for exceptions, see Barnes, Auburn, & Lea, 2004; Sanchez-Mazas, Van Humskerken, & Casini, 2003; Shotter, 1993). Although some authors have recently suggested that research into national identity is synonymous with the study of citizenship (Billig, 1995; Haste, 2004), the practice of conflating these constructs has been widely questioned by sociologists and political scientists (e.g. McCrone & Kiely, 2000; Walby, 2003).

Social psychologists have not only neglected general issues pertaining to everyday understandings of citizenship, but have also overlooked more specific questions concerning the ways in which ordinary social actors may orient to formal political processes. As Krosnick (1990) noted, accounts of voter behaviour published in social psychology have traditionally relied heavily on work conceived and conducted by political scientists. Some work on political reasoning has been conducted from a social representations perspective (Bhavnani, 1991; Himmelweit, Humphries, Jaeger, & Katz, 1981) but this avenue of research still remains relatively underdeveloped. Researchers adopting social identity and self-categorization perspectives have occasionally applied their approach to political rhetoric (e.g. Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2004; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001) or to social movement activity (e.g. Drury & Reicher, 1999; Drury, Reicher, & Stott, 2003), but it is not clear how far the findings generalize to ordinary social actors. Similarly, rhetorical or discursive analyses of political ideology (Billig, 1978, 1981, 1986; Weltman, 2004) have tended to focus on people who hold political office or who espouse extreme views, somewhat at the expense of considering more mundane forms of political reasoning.

These few exceptions aside, in so far as social psychological theories and constructs have been applied to questions relating to political subjectivity and action the resultant accounts have tended to be both generic and individualistic. For example, political attitudes and behaviours may be explained with reference to psychological universals or to individual differences in values (e.g. Barnea & Schwartz, 1998; Rokeach, 1979), cognitive neuropsychological processes (Lieberman, Schreiber, & Ochsner, 2003), cognitive style (e.g. Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Kossowska & Van Hiel, 2003) or personality traits (e.g. Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Taking issue with these kinds of approaches, Haste (2004) argued that psychological research on citizenship should pay more attention to commonsense representations of political processes, and should adopt a 'cultural perspective' affording an appreciation of the specific forms that political norms and values may take in different parts of the world.

In this paper we adopt the position advocated by Haste, and explore the advantages of supplementing traditional survey approaches to political cognition and action with an analysis of commonsense understandings of political participation and citizenship as revealed through vernacular accounting practices. Specifically, we draw upon the ideological dilemmas perspective on everyday thought and talk (Billig et al., 1988) to examine how young adults in England reason about formal political engagement.

### *Young people and political participation*

The focus of the present paper bears upon the longstanding problem of political (in) activity among young people in England. Although political scientists have conventionally treated the UK as a prototypical example of a democratic political culture (e.g. Almond & Verba, 1963), the population has generally evidenced relatively low levels of formal political engagement (Kavanagh, 1989; Marsh, 1977, 1990). Summarizing the situation, Bromley and Curtice (2002) went so far as to suggest that, 'the most pressing question' relating to political participation in the UK 'is not why people vote for one party rather than another but rather why they do not vote at all' (p. 141).

Political disengagement is often regarded as a problem in so far as '[a] healthy democracy depends on an active citizenry' (Haste, 2004 p. 426). Particular concern has been expressed over the role of formal educational (Galston, 2001; McDonnell, Timpane, & Benjamin, 2000; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schultz, 2001) and familial (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989) experiences in shaping young people into democratic citizens. It is therefore not surprising that the relatively low level of political engagement on the part of young people has represented a particular object of empirical concern (Jowell & Park, 1998; Kimberlee, 2002; Park, 2004; Southwell, 2003).

Conventionally, reluctance to engage in formal political activity has been treated as functionally synonymous with apathy (e.g. Campbell, 1962). However, since young people often do display interest in a range of political and social issues (e.g. Henn, Weinstein, & Wring, 2002; White, Bruce, & Richie, 2000) other explanations have been sought for their failure to engage in the political process. Survey data generally indicate that intention to vote correlates with factors such as perceived political efficacy (the belief that citizens can influence the working of government) (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960), the possession of resources such as money and time (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978), and 'political expertise', including interest in politics and willingness to seek out and engage with political information (Krosnick, 1990). In addition, on the basis of research conducted in the USA, Knack and Kropf (1998) have suggested that voting may be encouraged by local community norms against 'free riding'.

In the UK, concern over the apparent failure of young people to engage actively in the political process has led to the development of a range of practical initiatives aimed at promoting political awareness and community involvement. One notable example involved the introduction of citizenship education as a compulsory element of the National Curriculum in England in 2002, following recommendations from the Advisory Group on Citizenship chaired by Sir Bernard Crick. The Crick (1998) Report suggested that 'effective education for citizenship' would involve instruction on three issues. First, young people should be encouraged to develop values of social and moral responsibility towards each other and towards those in authority. This would include understanding their duty of care towards others, and understanding the importance of premeditation concerning the

possible consequences of their actions. Second, young people should be solicited into local community engagement. This would involve 'learning about and becoming helpfully involved in the life and concerns of their communities, including learning through community involvement' (p. 12). Third, young people should be educated into 'political literacy', involving acquisition of the skills and knowledge necessary to enable them to engage critically with policy issues, to become 'effective in public life' (p. 13), and to believe themselves capable of influencing government at local and national<sup>1</sup> levels.

*The political culture(s) of the UK: Active and passive citizenship*

Although a good deal of research has considered the correlates of political activity, empirical studies have tended to rely on questionnaire surveys employing standardized measures. This has led researchers to bracket consideration of social actors' own vernacular understandings of the public sphere, and consequently to overlook the possibility that democratic citizenship may be understood in a variety of ways (cf. Turner, 1992).

The tendency to presume that democratic citizenship constitutes a singular and unambiguous construct has not been confined to advocates of quantitative research. In the course of promoting the use of qualitative methodologies in political psychology, Haste (2004) simply equated the constructs of 'citizenship' and 'active citizenship', and illustrated discourses of 'active citizenship' through examples drawn from British political discourse, including the Crick Report. In this respect, Haste's account may be questioned in relation to her own stated concern to 'adopt a cultural perspective' in so far as she overlooked the fact that the emphasis on active citizenship in the Crick Report was actually addressed against what is commonly understood to be the normative British grain of 'passive' citizenship. In fact, in the Introduction to the Report, the proposals for educating young people for active citizenship were explicitly presented as 'no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally' (Crick, 1998, p. 7).

The distinction between active (sometimes described as civic republican or communitarian) and passive (liberal individualist) conceptions of citizenship was famously summarized by Oldfield (1990) in terms of a distinction between citizenship understood as practice and duties and citizenship understood as status and rights. Discourses of active citizenship typically suggest that individual social actors are essentially constituted through the communities in which they live. The process of active citizenship is often understood in 'trickle-up' terms, whereby participation in voluntary local organizations translates into a sense of agency and responsibility with respect to national and international spheres. In contrast, Marquand (1991, p. 244) described the liberal individualist ethos in the UK as one in which the public sphere is understood to be populated by autonomous individuals who, far from having a duty to participate in public affairs, are accorded rights to protect them from undue interference by the community. From the perspective of this 'passive' model, citizenship is seen as belonging:

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<sup>1</sup>The term 'national' as a reference to state is technically a misnomer in a UK context, since the British State actually constitutes a multi-national polity. The use of this terminology will be retained here in the interests of compatibility with formulations such as 'national election'. However, the potential ambiguities that may arise when the term 'nation' is used to refer simultaneously to the component countries of the UK, and to the UK as a whole, are illustrated in the quotation from the Crick Report cited on page 135.

unconditionally to all its possessors and [...] confers rights upon them by virtue of this fact. There is no suggestion that rights have to be earned or that they will cease to belong to their owners if they are not used. The only obligation which citizens *qua* citizens owe to each other is the obligation to respect each others' rights.

To date, most empirical analyses of Anglo British<sup>2</sup> political culture have focussed on parliamentary and legislative discourse (e.g. Favell, 1998). However, authors commonly presuppose that similar forms of understanding will also inform everyday political consciousness. For example, Preston (1994) described liberal individualism as:

[the] day-to-day working area of the official ideology [of the British State]: the sphere between the public voices of authority and the private voices of the ordinary inhabitants of the UK, where received political discourse [...] 'runs-through-our-heads', and is manifest in the ordinary small change of conversation (p. 34).

However, Preston reported no concrete evidence to substantiate his assertion that the political discourse of liberal individualism is, indeed 'invoked in ordinary discourse' (p. 37), and to date no empirical work has addressed this question explicitly.

### *Ideological dilemmas*

The ideological dilemmas perspective (Billig et al., 1988) offers a potentially useful approach for studying the ways in which the presumptions of liberal democracy may be reflected in the 'small change of everyday conversation'. The concept of ideological dilemmas was originally developed in response to a number of general concerns relating to extant social scientific perspectives on public opinion. First was a concern over the ways in which social psychological theory and research tended to neglect the cultural and historical context within which individuals develop and express particular kinds of social attitude. Second was a concern over the ways in which sociological accounts of ideology tended to treat social actors as the passive recipients of inherited belief systems. A third concern related to the ways in which social scientific accounts tended to assume that public opinion was necessarily characterized by internal consistency. Drawing from Billig's (1987, see also Billig, 1991) rhetorical account of thought, the ideological dilemmas perspective emphasized how both formal and common-sense ideologies should be understood as containing contrary, and on occasions explicitly contradictory or 'dilemmatic', themes.

By way of exemplification, Billig et al. (1988) reported a series of case studies illustrating how tensions within liberal ideology (e.g., between the competing values of equality versus authority, of individuality versus common human nature) could be identified in 'common-place' arguments concerning gender, education, prejudice, health and expertise. For present purposes it is significant to note that although Billig and his colleagues assumed a democratic political culture as part of the background against which such everyday talk took place, they did not explicitly consider how social actors may deliberate about, and justify their own action in relation to, formal political processes.

In this paper we explore the advantages of supplementing traditional survey approaches to political engagement with attention to the ideological and dilemmatic aspects of political reasoning as revealed in talk. Specifically, we focus on how young adults in England may draw upon a combination of liberal individualist and communitarian values in order to rationalize both active political participation and political non-engagement.

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<sup>2</sup>Some commentators have suggested that the liberal individualist ethos of the British state may reflect a specifically English form of political culture (e.g. MacCormick, 1998).

## METHODS

Data were drawn from a study of orientations to citizenship among young adults aged 18–24. The original study involved ten different research sites in Europe (see Jamieson, 2002). However, bearing in mind Haste's (2004) injunctions concerning the need for analysis of political reasoning to 'adopt a cultural perspective', for present purposes we will focus solely on the sample from Greater Manchester, in the North West of England.

### *Preliminary random sample survey*

The first stage of the research involved random sample surveys. The survey instrument included items pertaining to the respondents' family circumstances, their local, national and European identities and their civic and political participation (see Grundy & Jamieson, 2004). The responses of the Greater Manchester sample ( $N = 364$ ) to the items relating to political activity and interest confirmed trends previously identified in survey research. When asked about voting intentions, less than a third of the sample (29.4%) said that they would vote in a European Union election, and about half said they would vote in a local (51.5%) or UK General (56%) election. Responses also indicated a fairly high degree of cynicism concerning the efficacy of parliamentary democracy. Half of the sample (56.1%) said that they had no personal influence over what the government was doing, a third (32.9%) agreed that there was little point in voting and only half (47.6%) thought that it mattered which political party was in power. However, responses to a measure of interest in contemporary political issues did not suggest the existence of widespread apathy.<sup>3</sup>

In summary, the survey replicated previous findings from the UK concerning young people's political participation, perceived political efficacy and interest in social and political issues. However, these data provide few clues concerning how the respondents did in fact understand themselves as the subjects or objects of governance. The second stage of the research programme therefore focussed specifically on questions relating to everyday understandings of citizenship and political participation, employing conversational interviews with a strategically selected sub-sample of the original survey respondents.

### *Conversational interview accounts*

*Sample.* Qualitative research often compensates for small sample sizes by maximizing sample heterogeneity within prescribed limits (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This minimizes the risk of sampling bias when formulating generalizations, and the use of heterogeneous samples can also assist inductive analysis of response patterning. The sample selected for our study comprised 24 white respondents (12 men and 12 women) all of whom had been born and educated in England. The sample included individuals from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, educational levels (from people with no educational qualifications to those with post-graduate education) and political affiliations. In addition, an effort was made to include respondents who had reported varying levels of political and civic engagement in response to the survey.

*Interviews.* The interview guide covered similar issues to the survey, including matters relating to personal and social identity, civil society and citizenship. Some issues were

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<sup>3</sup>Respondents indicated, on a five point scale, their level of personal interest in ten issues: The environment; Job and training opportunities; Public services or facilities; Poverty; Equality between men and women; Terrorism; Discrimination against minorities; Animal rights; Unification of Europe; Quality and content of education. Analysis revealed a mean total score of 30.5 ( $SD = 6.39$ ), well above the scale midpoint.

introduced by questions using standardized wording. However, most topics were raised in a flexible style to accommodate the interests and level of comprehension of individual respondents (see Schober, 1999; Suchman & Jordan, 1990, for accounts of the advantages of conversational over standardized interview techniques). The particular issue of present concern—political participation, including voting in referenda and elections and taking part in demonstrations—was generally introduced in a relatively informal manner.

Most respondents were interviewed individually, although in two cases respondents were interviewed jointly with their partner. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. All interviews were transcribed for content and transcripts anonymized prior to analysis using techniques recommended by the Economic and Social Data Service.<sup>4</sup> Bearing in mind possible respondent sensitivities to the depersonalizing effects of anonymization (Grinyer, 2002), participants were offered the opportunity to select their own pseudonym.

For the purposes of using the conversational interviews to explore respondents' understandings of political participation, we strategically bracketed the question of whether these accounts necessarily provide a direct (valid, reliable or comprehensive) insight into the respondents' actual behaviour, or the real reasons why they acted as they did. Rather, we treated these accounts as samples of discursive action that provide evidence concerning the interpretative resources on which the speakers are drawing, and the cultural norms and values to which they are orienting (Potter & Mulkay, 1985; Wetherell, 2003).

*Analytic procedures.* Prior to analysis, all transcripts were indexed for thematic content using ATLAS ti. For present purposes we will be focussing on those stretches of talk which included some reference to formal political participation, including voting in elections and in referenda. Notwithstanding efforts to preserve contextual information at the point of indexing, analyses of extracts were always treated as provisional until interpretations were checked against a reading of the extract within the context of the interview as a whole.

In view of the heterogeneity of the sample and the loosely structured character of the interview conversations, it was not surprising to find variation within and between the respondents' accounts. However, in line with the ideological dilemmas perspective, our analytic strategy was directed towards the identification of 'common-place' aspects of accounting practice. The frequency and occasioning of particular lines of argument was analysed through category counts and truth tables (Seale, 1999) with a view to identifying beliefs and values that tended to be widely endorsed. Analysis of the presentational features of the interview accounts was used to identify beliefs and values that the respondents themselves were treating as 'common knowledge' (Edwards & Mercer, 1987).

## RESULTS

In summarizing our findings we first consider how the interview accounts related to the survey data concerning voting intentions and political efficacy. We then outline seven common themes in the interview talk: the stereotype of politically disengaged youth; competing values of community membership and independent rationality; the tension between rights to personal opinion and norms of interpersonal civility; competing values of

<sup>4</sup><http://www.esds.ac.uk/aandp/create/identguideline.asp> (Retrieved 12.04.06).

public opinion and political expertise; distinctions between rights to opinion and the legitimacy of overt political action; formal citizenship education as qualification for political decision-making, and the perceived relationship between national identity and responsible citizenship.

#### *Accounts of voting intentions and perceived political efficacy*

The interview accounts broadly corresponded to the survey findings relating to political activity although, if anything, respondents displayed less inclination towards formal political engagement than they had in the more structured survey setting. Even those respondents who had said, in response to the survey, that they intended to vote did not generally treat voting as an important civic duty in the interview context:

#### **Extract 1: ‘I might as well’**

- 1 I: So if there was a general election tomorrow, would you vote?  
 2 Neil: I don’t see why not. I might as well. It wouldn’t do any harm.  
 3 I: Do you feel like it’s something you ought to do?  
 4 Neil: No not really. Cos realistically, it’s not going to make any  
 5 difference or anything. Like, it’s not as though my vote’s going to be decisive  
 6 or anything.

#### **Extract 2: ‘I’ve got nothing better to do...’**

- 1 I: Yes, yes, sure. If there was like a—you mentioned before about not  
 2 being particularly keen on – on the euro. If we had like a referendum  
 3 or something say, tomorrow –  
 4 Craig: I’d go and vote against it.  
 5 I: You’d go and vote against it?  
 6 Craig: Because I’ve got nothing better to do.

As we shall see shortly, respondents often treated political engagement as normatively desirable. However, they were also inclined to treat active engagement with the formal political process as a potentially accountable matter. Consequently there was a common tendency (illustrated in Extracts 1 and 2 above) for respondents to soften, justify or to mitigate their reports of past or prospective future political engagement.

The conversational interview accounts were also generally consistent with the survey reports of perceived political efficacy. Respondents often spontaneously expressed the view that their vote would not make any difference (see Extract 1), or that it made no difference which party was in power. In Extract 3, for example, Julie argues that ‘*all the parties are just the same*’ (line 3), and goes on to work this up in the form of a critique of the party political system whereby the process of argumentation becomes an end in itself:

#### **Extract 3: Political debate as pointless**

- 1 Julie: [...] But I don’t really see it as much point in voting anyway.  
 2 I: Why not, what’s the (.)?

3 Julie: Because all the parties are just the same, to me they just seem the same  
 4 anyway, they're all just saying whatever they want to say and then they  
 5 go back on what they've said and try and pretend that they didn't  
 6 actually say it, and whatever like the Conservatives say something,  
 7 then the Labour is just like, that's a bad idea, don't do that, don't do  
 8 that, but if it was the other way round it'd still be the same, if they had  
 9 an idea, the Conservatives, they're just so busy squabbling that  
 10 nothing ever gets done, and I just think it's pointless really.

*The stereotype of politically inactive youth*

Extract 4 provides another example in which a respondent invokes concerns over political efficacy in order to justify political inaction ('*what can one vote do?*', lines 10–11; '*there's no point voting*', lines 14–15). In this case the speaker also explicitly attends to the potential accountability of this sort of argument ('*I know that's a bit of a cop out*', line 11) and attempts to explain her own behaviour by treating this as a position that might be generally expected in '*a young person*' (lines 8–9):

**Extract 4: 'I think I am your typical young person'**

1 Faye: I used to live with a girl who did politics at university and when I  
 2 lived there she made us vote because she said it was our duty and she'd  
 3 drag us all down to the polling station but [. . .] I'm not very good at  
 4 things like that.  
 5 I: That's fine, that's fine. So do you – is there anything that – that would  
 6 make you vote do you think, any sort of issues that would get  
 7 you fired up if you like?  
 8 Faye: Er, oh, I think I am your typical young person who doesn't really have  
 9 an interest in politics and I don't think (. . .) I do feel that really I should  
 10 perhaps be more involved but I tend to think well, what can one vote  
 11 do? I know that's – a bit of a cop out but I don't know [. . .] many of  
 12 my other friends who would be that passionate about voting. Er, partly  
 13 because I think well, who do I vote for? I don't know enough about  
 14 what there is on offer so then I just tend to think oh well, there's no  
 15 point voting.

The narrative figure of politically disengaged youth was commonly employed in the interviews. In the context of an account of the respondent's own lack of political engagement this stereotype could be used to construct face-saving arguments in two ways. First, by treating political disengagement as a category-related feature of 'young people', a respondent could mitigate his or her own personal behaviour (as Faye does in Extract 4). Second, this kind of argument could afford representations of political disengagement as a transitory stage of personal development, and hence could be used to deflect attributions of permanent character deficit. Respondents would often supplement reflections on their own current lack of political interest or activity with coda to the effect that this would probably change 'when I am older', or 'when I settle down' (see e.g. Extract 5).

In the next section we shall see how respondents could render the category of 'young person' relevant to matters of political engagement by relating it in various ways to notions

of community. For the time being, however, we may note that the very fact that this stereotype was spontaneously used in the conversational interview accounts is noteworthy in view of the fact that social scientists have long been concerned with age or generation 'effects' on political participation but have rarely considered the possibility that the image of politically disengaged youth might be available to ordinary social actors to explain, and possibly regulate, their own activity.

*Community membership: Entitlement to opinionation versus rational detachment*

The ways in which respondents treated non-engagement in formal political activity as 'typical' of their peers might appear consistent with Knack and Kropf's (1998) account of the significance of local norms of civic engagement for personal motivation to vote. However, respondents could also construct arguments in which political disengagement was not simply treated as common among, but also as morally *appropriate* for, people of their own age or life-stage. This could be expressed through two slightly different types of argument, both of which linked the category of age to the construct of community.

The first kind of argument treated 'settling down' as a criterion for participation in local and, by extension, national politics. In this respect, community membership could be treated as a source of entitlement for political activity:

**Extract 5: 'it's not really right for me to have a say'**

- 1 I: Did you vote in the last election?  
 2 Rick: No but simply for the reason that I was not going to stay  
 3 in the area, so it wouldn't really be fair for the people who lived there  
 4 for me to have a say. They're going to have to live with their MP for  
 5 years, and I'll be moving away after my finals, so it's not really on. I  
 6 can't see the local community being too keen if those sorts of  
 7 decisions ended up being thrust on them by the students cos there's a  
 8 lot of us here but it's not like we're part of the community, it's just  
 9 we're living here temporarily. But when I've settled down somewhere,  
 10 then I'll start voting.  
 11 I: Did you think maybe of voting back home?  
 12 Rick: Not really, for the same reason. Though it's where I was brought up  
 13 and where my Mum and Dad live, I'm not intending on moving back  
 14 there, so it's not really right for me to have a say.

In England, young people often move away from 'home' for the purposes of undertaking higher education. Consequently, notions of local community could have a double-edged quality for our respondents. On the one hand, community belonging could be regarded as necessary qualification for active political engagement, as exemplified in Extract 5. On the other hand, local community involvement was often associated stereotypically with a constellation of constructs relating to immaturity, parochialism, working-class status, lack of education and lack of open-minded rationality. This hybrid categorization device contributed to a second way in which the category of youth, via the intermediary construct of life-stage, could be related to normative injunctions against formal political activity. This involved an understanding of genuine attitudes as essentially independent judgements that are contingent upon an individual breaking away from their community of origin. In Extract 6, for example, Mary distinguishes the situation in which political opinions are

'fed' to young people by their parents from the act of thinking for oneself and formulating judgements on the basis of first hand experience:

**Extract 6: Thinking 'for oneself': Authentic versus inherited opinion**

- 1 Mary: [...] And – and I do think that maybe our generation  
2 doesn't concern themselves with it as much as er – as much as they  
3 should do. And a lot of opinions are formed purely based on what, you  
4 know, parents are feeding – feeding to them like. Because er, I mean  
5 when I – when I voted in Leeds, that's the first time I actually didn't  
6 vote for who – who my mum votes for. Er, because I sat back  
7 and thought to myself, 'hmm. Did I put that cross in that box in Bury  
8 because that's where my mum puts hers' and you tend to trust your  
9 parents' judgement or – and you – I think – I think a lot of  
10 voting by our generation gets done in that sense.
- 11 Alan: Yeah. Definitely.
- 12 Mary: You put your – the cross in the box that your mum and dad would put –
- 13 Alan: Put your parents –
- 14 Mary: Their cross in. Rather than – they don't really –
- 15 Alan: Form your own opinion.
- 16 Mary: Look around and you know.
- 17 Alan: I think the only people who really take any interest in politics in  
18 our generation are people that are actually studying politics!  
19 I honestly don't think that anyone else – and none of my mates buy the  
20 paper and read – read what's going on.

We noted in the introduction how contemporary discourses of active citizenship often endorse a 'trickle-up' thesis, whereby an individual's engagement in, and sense of personal responsibility towards, their local community becomes generalized into a sense of duty towards imagined national and, ultimately, transnational (e.g. EU, global) communities. It is therefore interesting to note that those respondents who had experienced higher education were inclined to treat an interest in local community affairs as positively antithetical to rational engagement with national or EU politics. Although this was especially evident in the accounts of respondents who had moved away from their parental homes, young people who attended local colleges also represented themselves as having developed intellectually beyond the narrow-minded parochialism of local community. This is illustrated in Extract 7, taken from an interview with a respondent from a working class family background attending a local university:

**Extract 7: 'Local politics . . . don't really seem important'**

- 1 I: Right. Er, is there a sort of sense of community at all?
- 2 Mike: Er, kind of, yeah. Around my local estate, there's a kind of sense of  
3 community around there, yeah. Er, and I live quite close to my family  
4 as well. A lot of my family live fairly close, so.
- 5 I: Yeah. What about er, local politics? Do you take an interest in any – any of  
6 that?
- 7 Mike: Er, not local politics, no. I do politics actually but I'm more

- 8 interested in national politics than local politics.
- 9 I: Okay, yeah? What sort of things do you take an interest in particularly?
- 10 Mike: ((coughs)) Europe. Yeah. Europe, the policies, whether to go into
- 11 Europe or not.
- 12 I: Okay. What's your thoughts on that?
- 13 Mike: Er, at first I didn't think we should but now I've er, changed my mind
- 14 I think we should.
- 15 I: Okay. What – what caused that change?
- 16 Mike: Er, it's thinking about the future – like if you read like papers like The Sun
- 17 and things like that – You get a view that oh, we shouldn't, it's not good
- 18 for
- 19 business – But since I've been studying the law and politics, I think it is
- 20 better for the country.
- [. . .]
- 41 I: But would you be more likely to vote in [UK general and EU] elections than
- 42 in like the local ones?
- 43 Mike: Yeah.
- 44 I: Yeah. (3) And why would that be?
- 45 Mike: Er, I don't know. Local politics just don't really seem important. It's
- 46 more about the party that's in power that seems important. So that's
- 47 why I vote for the national, politics er – as regards to er, European, it
- 48 seems quite important at the moment.

Lines 2–8 illustrate how respondents could distinguish community membership from interest or engagement in local politics (note, incidentally, how Mike interprets the term 'community' as pertaining to familial bonds within a working-class [council] estate). This extract also illustrates how respondents could forge an explicit distinction between the constructs of 'local politics' and 'national politics', with only the latter being associated with general ideological concerns ('*the party that's in power*', line 46). In this particular case, it is interesting to note how Mike warrants his lack of personal interest in local politics, and his greater interest in the national and European spheres, with reference to his formal educational experiences, '*doing politics*' (lines 7 and 18). We shall return to the general question of the relationship between formal political education, personal opinion and political action later. For the time being, we may note Mike's use of a narrative of enlightenment ('*I've . . . changed my mind*', line 13), involving a transition from a situation in which his personal opinion on the EU reflected commonsense informed by the popular news media (note his use of the generic 'you' on lines 16–17), to one in which his attitudes were transformed through the experience of '*studying law and politics*' (line 19).

### *Rights to opinion versus civic responsibility*

Although the interview respondents often justified political disengagement as usual or even appropriate for people of their age or stage of life, these same individuals also tended to orient to a normative assumption that political engagement was a marker of maturity and civic responsibility. For example, in the stretches of talk reported in Extracts 4, 5 and 6, the speakers all orient to the norm of political activity, '*I should perhaps be more involved*';

'when I've settled down somewhere, then I'll start voting'; 'maybe our generation doesn't concern themselves with [politics] as much as they should do'. However, this appreciation of the value of political engagement was in practice often displayed in conjunction with normative concerns relating to civility and good citizenship, which could cast local political engagement in a more dilemmatic light.

In his discussion of the 'passive' construction of citizenship dominating UK political life, Marquand (1991) noted how norms of respect for the autonomy of others could lead to active political engagement being cast as a form of incivility. The idea that political action might represent a breach of social etiquette was often raised spontaneously in the interview accounts. In Extract 8, for example, Kim casts overt political protest as a form of environmental pollution ('*make lots of noise*', line 8) reflecting a lack of respect for the authenticity of individual opinion ('*make other people agree with them*', line 9):

**Extract 8: 'Everybody's entitled to their own opinion'**

- 1 I: What about things like going on a demonstrations?  
 2 Kim: Nah.  
 3 I: You didn't fancy the anti-war demonstration?  
 4 Kim: Nah, I'm not really very anti-war. I don't know. I think if there were  
 5 pro-war demonstrations I think that everybody'd get very cross.  
 6 So I don't see why they should be able to have anti-war  
 7 demonstrations. Everybody's entitled to their own opinion, and it's not  
 8 right that some people like think that they can just make a lot of noise  
 9 and make other people agree with them.

In this stretch of talk, Kim adopts a stance that Billig (1989) has described as the 'multi-subjective' perspective on matters of public opinion. According to this line of argument, individuals differ in their views, and all individuals have equal rights to hold 'their own opinion'. Consequently, persuasive rhetoric or political campaigning may be seen as an illegitimate attempt to 'push' one's views onto others.

We noted above how, in both the survey and the conversational interviews, respondents often suggested that they saw little point in voting. One exception could be found in the responses of the six survey participants who supported the far right British National Party (BNP) all of whom reported a strong sense of both personal and system efficacy. For other respondents, the existence of far right political parties could be treated as an exceptional justification for active local political engagement. In Extract 9, for example, Roz treats opposition to the National Front as an exception to the general rule of political disengagement, and presents this stance as common knowledge ('*obviously*', lines 3 and 5):

**Extract 9: 'You don't want the National Front in'**

- 1 Roz: You know, as far as I'm concerned it doesn't make any difference to  
 2 me who's in, power and, whether it be Labour, Conservatives or,  
 3 whoever. I mean I think obviously, if the National Front got in, that's  
 4 going to not be – it's not going to go down very well. Er, but apart  
 5 from that, you know, that's – That's the only one I'd say obviously you  
 6 don't want in. And a lot of conflict and things like that.

It is interesting to note how white respondents tended to cast their support for action against the far right as motivated by concerns over liberal civility, specifically the avoidance of ‘conflict’ brought about by the BNP’s overt political presence and violation of the norm of equal respect. A similar stance is illustrated in Extract 10, in which Karen and John are talking about the BNP canvassing in their local area:

**Extract 10: ‘it wouldn’t be nice for other people’**

- 1 I: Sure, yeah. Is there a, do you, do you sort of take an interest in like local  
2 politics or anything like that?  
3 John: Er, not with the g-, not really. We sort of hear things, and we know the local  
4 councillor lives on Montague Road.  
5 I: Right.  
6 John: Er, I used to go to school with her sons so that’s like the only reason I know.  
7 I: Okay.  
8 John: And we also found out, [to Karen] you find out quite a lot through [work]  
9 don’t you?  
10 Karen: Yeah we’ll have to start voting though because BNP are trying to get in  
11 round here.  
12 John: Yeah.  
13 I: Are they?  
14 Karen: Yeah. They’ve been canvassing and everything.  
[...]  
19 Karen: They’ve got some seats in Oldham.  
20 I: Right, oh yeah I’ve, yeah.  
21 John: Yeah. Which isn’t very good. I wouldn’t want them round here because -  
22 I: Yeah.  
23 John: I don’t get involved in it that much but I wouldn’t want that kind of -  
24 I: Sure.  
25 John: atmosphere, it wouldn’t be nice for other people, so.

Once again we can see how Karen presupposes that the presence of BNP activity in her local area constitutes a sufficient, and exceptional, reason for political engagement ‘*we’ll have to start voting though because...*’ (line 10). John glosses his concern over the BNP as a matter of bad ‘*atmosphere*’, and justifies his opposition as a matter of charitable concern for ‘*other people*’. In this case, attention to the organization of John’s account is instructive. Specifically, we may note how John presents the statement ‘*I don’t get involved...but*’ in the form of a disclaimer, thereby displaying an understanding of political action (rather than inaction) as normally requiring explanation and justification.

*Political expertise: Factual knowledge versus personal opinion*

We noted in the introduction how social psychologists and political scientists have often suggested that political participation may be facilitated by a constellation of personal characteristics collectively termed, ‘political expertise’. This includes factors such as interest in politics, the possession of general and domain specific information, and

'cognitive complexity' in understanding public affairs (Fisk, Lau, & Smith, 1990; Krosnick, 1990; Luskin, 1987). Like many similar social scientific constructs, the notion of political expertise may be traced to a specific historical legacy. Marquand (2004) noted how the rise of the professions in the 19th century led to a distinction between civic issues, capable of being debated democratically and decided on the basis of public opinion, and technical issues for which authority should be devolved to designated experts. In the early 20th century, this distinction was famously adopted by Walter Lippmann (1922) when he argued that the scale and complexity of modern states was such that decision making could not be left to individual citizens whose experiential and knowledge base would be limited to the sphere of local practice, and whose judgements would, of necessity, be based on 'stereotypes' rather than rational deliberation. In their account of the dilemmatic aspects of liberal ideology, however, Billig et al. (1988) argued that the distinction between civic and technical issues is not clear-cut, but rather involves a 'dilemma of equality and authority', involving contestation concerning which particular decisions should be treated as a matter for public opinion, and which constitute technical issues requiring specialist qualification.

In the interview context, respondents often spontaneously referred to matters of political interest, knowledge and exposure to information. Like formal social scientific accounts of political expertise these lay repertoires displayed an individualistic perspective, with political knowledge and interest being treated as psychological properties of particular kinds of people. In addition, respondents typically adopted elitist models, whereby motivation and qualification for political engagement was associated with formal education. Hence, in Extract 4, Faye contrasted her friends' lack of political motivation with the narrative figure of '*a girl who did politics at university*' (line 1). Similarly, in Extract 6 Alan commented: '*I think the only people who really take any interest in politics in our generation are people that are actually studying politics!*' (lines 17–18).

As we shall see in the next section, respondents often suggested that political decision-making should be rightly devolved to those with especial domain-specific expertise. However, it was interesting to note that respondents sometimes also treated political opinionation as a technical rather than a civic matter. In Extract 11 we see the dilemma of equality and authority played out in the form of a struggle between interviewer and respondent. Throughout, the interviewer attempts to promote a frame of democratic equality, explicitly forging a distinction between personal opinion and factual knowledge ('*I'm just interested in your opinion really. Like, what do you think? There isn't a right or wrong answer*', lines 9–10), and attempting to legitimate an 'equal rights to opinion' repertoire by positioning herself as ill informed. Nicola, in contrast, consistently resists this frame, casts '*politics and stuff*' (lines 11–12) as a matter of factual knowledge and special training, and consequently disclaims the expertise necessary in order to be able to formulate a public statement of personal opinion:

#### Extract 11: 'I don't really know enough'

- 1 I: So if there was an election tomorrow, do you think you would vote?  
 2 Nicola: I don't really know what's going on to be honest. I don't really watch  
 3 the news much.  
 4 I: I don't keep up much myself to be honest. But what about things like  
 5 the war [in Iraq] do you have an opinion on that say?  
 6 Nicola: I – I don't know. People who are doing y'know politics and things at  
 7 college might know. My friend, she did something about politics

- 8 and voting, so you might be better asking her.
- 9 I: Yes, yes. I'm just interested in your opinion really. Like, what do you  
10 think? There isn't a right or wrong answer.
- 11 Nicola: My friend would know, because like I said, she's done politics and  
12 stuff.
- 13 I: It's (.) there's not like a right or wrong answer like I don't really  
14 know anything about it myself. I'm just interested in your opinion  
15 really. Like do you think the war is a good thing? Do you think we  
16 should have got involved?
- 17 Nicola: As I said, I don't really know enough about politics and that. Just keep  
18 myself to myself and mind my own business y'know.

Nicola had few educational qualifications, and her claims to lack of entitlement to comment on 'the war' might, of course, represent a strategic attempt to protect her face in front of the university-employed interviewer. For present purposes, however, what is significant is the very fact that Nicola is able to treat her lack of formal education as sufficient justification for her refusal to voice a personal opinion.

Up to this point we have been focussing largely on instances in which speakers referred to political expertise in the course of explaining their personal lack of interest in political engagement. It was therefore instructive to note that on the rare occasions when a respondent did claim a strong interest in political issues or displayed enthusiasm for active political participation, they also drew upon elitist repertoires of exceptional personal qualification rather than on discourses of democratic rights or communitarian responsibility. In Extract 7, Mike explained his personal interest in EU and national politics with recourse to the fact that he was currently 'doing politics' at university. Benjamin, who is quoted in Extract 12 below, displayed the strongest interest in political engagement of all of the interview respondents. He described his views as socialist and claimed some ambitions to a political career at the local and eventually UK levels. However, rather than speaking as a member of a local or national demos, Benjamin positioned himself as qualified for political engagement precisely in contrast to an imagined mass of the British public:

**Extract 12: 'I'm not convinced that the population is at a sufficient intellectual level'**

- 1 Ben: [...] at the moment people need to start thinking for themselves. I  
2 mean some kind of democracy I mean ideally I would like something  
3 that localized I mean fundamentally that's what democracy suggests,  
4 i.e. everyone has their say. At the moment I'm not convinced that the  
5 population is at a sufficient intellectual level to make that – have that  
6 say. Erm, I don't know you know how I can justify that but I mean the  
7 fact that half the country don't vote and of the 50% that do most of  
8 them probably do it because of what they were kind of brought up with  
9 and what they feel they should vote for. I mean those figures I feel are  
10 still kind of exaggerated and I think it's a hell of a lot less people that  
11 actually make a conscious vote on the day.

This extract again illustrates a dilemmatic tension between values of local community and popular voice, and respect for forms of rationality that are understood to be contingent precisely upon an individual's capacity to extricate themselves from the psychological constraints of local community influence. On the one hand, Benjamin orients to a norm of democratic equality according to which, *'everyone has their say'* (line 4). On the other hand, he overrides this principled consideration with a lay critique of public opinion that has notable parallels with Walter Lippmann's exposition, presenting 'people' (other than himself) as intellectually ill equipped for responsible political engagement. These two considerations are reconciled by treating the deficiencies of the general public as a temporary condition rather than a permanent state of affairs (*'at the moment'*, line 4). Benjamin's understanding of genuine opinions as those arrived at through independent rationality (*'thinking for themselves'*, line 1) rather than sentiment (line 9) transmitted through upbringing (line 8) has obvious parallels with Mary's account in extract 6.

*Leaving it 'up to them': Political disengagement as civic responsibility*

Many of the extracts considered so far involved *post hoc* accounts in which the respondent explained why he or she had not personally participated in formal political decision-making. In such cases, it is likely that these accounts were in part functioning as excuses designed to ward off potential charges of apathy or indolence (cf. Austin, 1961). However, we have also seen cases in which respondents treated political engagement as an accountable matter and attempted to mitigate or to justify their stated intentions to vote (Extracts 1, 2 and 10). In this section, we focus on some cases in which respondents treated political inaction as acceptable or as positively desirable as a matter of abstract principle. In order to simplify our account, all of the extracts used in this section involve answers to a hypothetical question pertaining to a referendum on the UK's adoption of the single European Currency. All three of the quoted respondents had been originally selected on the basis of their domain-specific expertise (cf. Kuklinski & Quirk, 2001), having received instruction concerning the EU and the euro on courses on European Studies.

At the start of Extract 13 we see Billy arguing against the euro on the grounds that this would represent a symbolic threat to British identity. However, when the interviewer follows this up and asks if he would vote in a referendum, Billy asserts that he would not:

**Extract 13: 'I would just leave them to it...'**

- 1 Billy: [...] and I don't agree with the euro that takes away, the identity of  
2 each individual country anyway.  
3 I: Right.  
4 Billy: Once Britain has lost Sterling it's lost just about everything that it had  
5 anyway other than the Queen and, they're looking to get rid of her  
6 soon aren't they?  
7 I: Mm. So if there was a referendum on the Euro tomorrow you'd vote?  
8 Billy: No.  
9 I: No.  
10 Billy: Well I wouldn't vote or anything I would just leave them to it.  
11 I: Okay.  
12 Billy: I wouldn't want it.

This extract provides a good example of the way in which respondents could differentiate between a personal concern over a particular political issue and formal participation in the decision-making process. In this case it would be hard to charge Billy with apathy concerning the euro: in his gist statement, he asserts baldly that, '*I wouldn't want it*' (line 12). In addition, there is nothing in this account to suggest that Billy is adopting a cynical orientation concerning the democratic process. Rather, what is significant about this extract is the very fact that Billy does nothing at all to explain, mitigate or justify his refusal to vote, and there is no indication that he is treating his in-principle refusal to translate his strong personal views into political action as in any way accountable.

In the conversation leading up to Extract 14, Cliff had also expressed strong personal views against the adoption of the euro, but when the interviewer asks him whether he would vote in a referendum, Cliff replies that he would '*rather sit back and let them do what they want*'. In this case, Cliff explicitly distinguishes his attitudes towards the euro from his attitudes towards political action (cf. Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980):

**Extract 14: 'I'd rather just sit back and let them do what they want'**

- 1 I: So if there was a referendum would you? (.)  
 2 Cliff: I don't think I'd feel inclined to vote because I don't know why, it's just, I  
 3 don't know why, it's just a freak in my personality I guess that I  
 4 just, I don't feel inclined to vote, I'd rather just, uh sit back and let  
 5 them do what they want. Like the whole country voted in Tony Blair  
 6 and he's upset quite a few people now he's gone to this war, well at the  
 7 end of the day the majority speaks and that's what they wanted, so  
 8 there can't be too many complaints. If they'd have said to him, if  
 9 they'd said to him when it was time to elect him, 'will you start a  
 10 war in Iraq with Saddam Hussain, if you believe Saddam Hussain's got  
 11 weapons of mass destruction?', um then obviously, well I presume his  
 12 answer would have been 'yes', and maybe that's, you know y-, sow your  
 13 own seeds maybe you just got to, if you're really that interested in  
 14 politics and gonna vote then dig deep and see what you voted for.

Again, Cliff's argument against engaging in political decision-making does not involve references to lack of personal or system efficacy. On the contrary, his 'as you sow, so shall you reap' line of argument rests upon the presumption that an irresponsible electorate who vote for a party, personality or policy without fully researching the potential ramifications have to be held accountable for the consequences of their decision. Cliff hence suggests that engagement in political decision-making not only renders the electorate accountable for political outcomes, but also disqualifies the individuals concerned from subsequently adopting a critical stance towards these unfolding political events.

In Extract 15 Liam goes one step further, and casts political inaction as a form of civic duty. Like Benjamin in Extract 13, Liam distinguishes two classes of social actor: a general public whose decisions are likely to be influenced by ill-informed stereotypes, and an intellectual elite who '*actually know what they are talking about*'. Consequently he is able to cast political inactivity on the part of the demos as a form of civic virtue, and restraint in exercising one's democratic rights as a matter of responsible citizenship:

**Extract 15: 'I'd rather just leave it up to . . . the select few that are informed'**

- 1       Liam: I'll leave it up to the people that know about it.  
 2       I:     Yeah. What about the euro in particular, er the currency? Is that  
 3       something you've got particularly strong feelings either way?  
 4       Liam: No, I just prefer to leave it up to the people that actually know what  
 5       they're talking about. I mean like when they say they're having a  
 6       referendum. Unless you completely educate the whole population  
 7       which is going to be quite hard because most people to be honest won't  
 8       be arsed about reading all the stuff that goes with it. I don't see what  
 9       the point of us having a vote on it because you're just going to say 'oh  
 10       well, I want to keep the pound', just because you, you think 'oh, the  
 11       pound's better', just because it's your own currency. So I'd rather  
 12       just leave it up to like, the select few that are informed, the economists  
 13       that actually know, the implications of it.

This extract illustrates the potentially complex ways in which political action may be understood in relation to individual political opinionation. In this case—unlike Billy in Extract 13 or Cliff in Extract 14—Liam is not claiming a strong personal opinion concerning the euro. On the contrary, like Nicola in Extract 11 he casts both political decision-making and political opinionation as technical matters. Consequently Liam is able to present his reluctance to express '*particularly strong feelings*' not as a passive apathetic stance, but rather as an active commitment to agnosticism.

*Expertise, trust and the paradox of citizenship education*

Citizenship education has not constituted a compulsory element of the English national curriculum long enough for us to be able reliably to monitor its direct effects. However, it is worth noting that our interview accounts suggest that formal educational experience may not necessarily be translated into norms of political action in any straightforward way. Certainly, those respondents who claimed not to have received any education in 'politics and stuff' could use this to explain their reluctance to engage with political issues. However, as Extracts 13–15 illustrate, respondents who had experienced a good deal of political education did not necessarily treat this as qualification for political action. On the contrary, the very fact that 'politics' constituted a curriculum subject could be viewed as good reason to cast political decision making as a technical matter, best left to those with the highest levels of formal qualification and training.

Chloe, whose discussion of the war in Iraq is reproduced below, reported having attended classes on citizenship when she was at school, and at the time of interview was taking a degree in social policy. In Extract 16, Chloe endorses the fact and value of equal rights to opinionation, which she treats as common knowledge: '*y'know I'm happy that my opinion is as valid as anyone else's*' (line 9), and displays a sense of political efficacy in so far as she assumes that, had she voted in a referendum, this might have influenced the behaviour of the government. Chloe claims commitment to a duty of care for others, '*deeply held principles it's wrong to kill*' (line 11), and displays respect for the authority of the government and for civil servants (lines 6–7). However, the upshot of Chloe's argument is not to suggest the need for public involvement in political decision-making, or even to

argue that the war should not be taking place. Rather, through the very process of recognizing the value of political expertise derived through formal education, Chloe concludes that factual knowledge deriving from specialist training must ultimately trump moral principle as the legitimate basis for political decision making, even when the outcome is likely to be quite literally a matter of life and death:

**Extract 16: ‘deeply-held principles’ versus ‘knowing the facts’**

- 1 I: If there had been a referendum against the war, would you have voted?  
 2 Chloe: Probably not cos much as I hate the war and I hate the idea of people  
 3 dying and stuff at the end of the day it’s not really up to me to say is it?  
 4 Like I’ve not even done international relations or anything at Uni and I  
 5 don’t really know like what’s going on and that. So you just have to  
 6 trust the government to know what they’re doing, and the civil servants  
 7 and that because that’s like their job and they’ve got specialist training  
 8 and y’know advice and all that stuff. I’ve just got like my own opinion.  
 9 And y’know I’m happy that my opinion is as valid as anyone else’s but  
 10 at the end of the day that’s all it is, an opinion, that’s based on like  
 11 general principles and like deeply held principles it’s wrong to kill  
 12 and that. But I don’t really know the facts.

It is tempting to see accounts such as this as involving a misunderstanding, or possibly even a misappropriation, of discourses of citizenship education. However, we may note that the same tension between values of universal rights to opinionation and requirements of especial qualification for political action may be identified in elite discourses promoting education for active citizenship. For example, the proposals outlined in the Crick Report were cast as an attempt to democratize the basis for political engagement on the part of an entire population or, at least, a new generation, of active citizens (hence the formulation of political understanding as a matter of ‘literacy’ rather than ‘expertise’). On the other hand, the Report’s authors warranted the introduction of citizenship education into the formal curriculum on the grounds that this constituted a genuine academic subject, involving:

‘learning a body of knowledge, as well as the development of skills and values. Such knowledge is as interesting, as intellectually demanding and as capable as any other subject of being taught and expressed at any level’ (1998 p. 8).

In this formulation, active citizenship becomes cast as a matter not of universal rights and duty, but rather of technical expertise, with respect to which individuals’ ‘levels’ of attainment may be measured and ranked. The utopian future society to which such education is directed does not involve a horizontal community (Anderson, 1983) of active citizens equally effective in public life and able to influence government at local and national levels, but rather a population of individuals who possess differential qualification for political engagement.

*Good citizenship versus national identity*

We noted in the introduction how social psychologists in the UK have tended to elide the analysis of citizenship with the study of ‘national identity’. The presumption that the practices and discourses of citizenship may be summarized in terms of injunctions to collective ‘identity’ also represents a common trope of contemporary political rhetoric. In

the Crick Report, for example, it was suggested that one objective of citizenship education would be to bolster a common sense of 'national' (British) identity:

a main aim for the whole community should be to find or restore a sense of common citizenship, including a national identity that is secure enough to find a place for the plurality of nations, cultures, ethnic identities and religions long found in the United Kingdom. Citizenship education creates common ground between different ethnic and religious identities (point 3.14, page 17).

However, these kinds of formulations do not always correspond very well with vernacular discourses of citizenship or civil society used by members of the general population. In England, discourses of nationhood have historically been dissociated from values of citizenship (Condor & Abell, 2006; Condor, Gibson, & Abell, 2006; Stapleton, 2005). Moreover, in everyday parlance, 'identity' may be treated as a matter for the private sphere, and political appeals to collective identity may consequently be interpreted as a marker of self-interest rather than of communitarian duty or entitlement (Condor & Gibson, forthcoming).

It is instructive to note that in none of the extracts considered above does a speaker represent themselves as members of a horizontal (Anderson, 1983) political community. On the contrary, respondents typically forged distinctions between factions of the body politic, whether between their own and their parents' generations (Extract 6), between settled and transient residents in a local area (Extract 5), between the white and ethnic minority populations (Extract 10), between those members of the general public who do and those who do not possess the necessary education to voice or act on political opinions (Extracts 11, 12), or between the mass of the population and a legitimate ruling elite (Extracts 13, 15, 16). We have already noted how, in the course of displaying their own credentials as responsible citizens, respondents could explicitly dissociate themselves as individuals from their local community and kinship networks. Similarly, respondents could display their concern to act in the national interest by dissociating themselves as individuals from the imagined mass of the British public. In Extract 7, Mike contrasted his own appreciation of EU membership as '*better for the country*' with uneducated popular opinion. In Extract 12, Benjamin distinguished his own reasoned and responsible approach to political engagement from the stance adopted by '*the population*' who are not at a '*sufficient intellectual level*'. In Extract 14, Cliff distinguished his own personal stance of responsible citizenship (this time characterized by political restraint) from the position adopted by the mass of his compatriots by positioning himself as an individual ('*it's just a freak in my personality*', line 3) against the '*whole country*' (line 5) or '*the majority*' (line 7) who irresponsibly engage in political decision-making without full appreciation of the potential consequences of their actions.

In Extract 15, Liam distinguished questions of disinterested citizenship from concerns over British identity. His argument rested on the presumption that opinions that are based on patriotic sentiment ('*just because it's your own currency*', line 11) constitute insufficient and potentially irresponsible grounds for political decision-making. In so far as Liam banally<sup>5</sup> presupposed that '*the economists*' are *British* economists, and in so far as he was referring implicitly to the consequences of the adoption of the euro for the *British* economy, he was effectively arguing that popular action that is based primarily on a defence of a distinctive British identity may not in fact be in the objective interests of the British state.

<sup>5</sup>Although Billig (1995) terms this as 'banal nationalism', the presumption that the UK represents the natural unit of accounting and governance would more properly be termed, 'banal statism'.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Academic accounts of everyday political reasoning have conventionally endorsed two competing notions of 'the public'. On the one hand, Lippmann's (1922) scepticism concerning the political motivation and expertise of the general population has regularly been echoed, most notably by Phillip Converse (1964) on the basis of his empirical research on mass publics in the USA. On the other hand, Gallop and Rae (1940) suggested that their pioneering opinion polling research demonstrated that political 'ignorance, stupidity and apathy are the exception, not the rule' (p. 287). The ideological dilemmas perspective that we have employed in this paper adopts a rather different stance. Rather than attempting to judge public opinion according to its informational content, the ideological dilemmas approach focuses instead on the study of vernacular representational practices, with a view to exploring the ways in which ordinary social actors reason about political structures, events and processes by drawing upon general ideological resources.<sup>6</sup>

According to the ideological dilemmas approach, we should not necessarily expect to find social actors espousing singular and consistent sets of beliefs, values and attitudes. Consequently, it was not surprising to find that, in the conversational interview context, respondents could endorse values of communitarianism and active citizenship, whilst also embracing normative concerns relating to liberal individualism. It is common for social psychological approaches to treat variability in discourse as evidence of logical contradiction (e.g. Potter & Wetherell, 1987). It was, therefore, interesting to note that even people with few formal educational qualifications could reconcile competing political values through relatively sophisticated lines of argument. For example, values of individual rights and communitarian duty could be reconciled by distinguishing between rights to *hold* an opinion, rights to *voice* an opinion and rights to *act on* an opinion. Similarly, representations of political expertise as the property of particular individuals could be reconciled with utopian values of universal participatory democracy through temporal projection. On a societal level, universal rational political participation could be treated as a future ideal rather than an extant possibility. On a personal level, respondents could mitigate their own lack of political engagement by invoking a future scenario in which (older, more 'settled') they would be prepared or able to engage actively in local or national politics.

Existing academic accounts have tended to explain non-participation in the formal political process through some form of 'deficit' model according to which political inaction is attributed to a lack of interest in political and social issues, a lack of cognitive sophistication, a lack of political knowledge, a lack of a sense of person or system efficacy, and so forth. Consequently, it was interesting to note that the respondents who participated in the conversational interview study did not simply mitigate, justify or excuse political inactivity, but under certain circumstances could treat political disengagement as legitimate and even as normatively appropriate. In particular, we may note the paradoxical situation whereby these young adults living in England at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century could rationalize – and even on occasions to valorise – political inaction by drawing on the same normative concerns relating to civility and responsible citizenship as those outlined in the

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<sup>6</sup>Academic approaches often treat the ability to meaningfully relate political issues and events to more general ideological principles as a matter of political 'sophistication' (e.g. Luskin, 1987). Consequently, the ideological dilemmas perspective allows that social actors may orient to the domain of the political in a relatively sophisticated manner even in the absence of detailed political information.

Crick Report designed to promote active civic and political engagement. Hence, respondents could invoke norms of care for other members of their local community not only to justify (Extracts 9, 10) but also to delegitimize (Extracts 5, 8) active political engagement. The importance of political literacy and trust in legitimate authority could be cited as reasons for devolving the responsibility for political decision-making onto more qualified persons (Extracts 11, 15, 16). The value of responsible calculation of the effects of one's actions could be invoked to argue for the need to exercise restraint before participating in the formal political process (Extracts 14, 15).

The data presented in this paper were obviously derived from a rather limited sample, and as such their generalisability to other contexts is clearly open to question. Nevertheless, our analysis does suggest that future research might do well to address the potential complexities of political reasoning which are inclined to be overlooked when social commentators presume that failure to engage in the formal political process necessarily reflects a condition of apathy, or a lack of engagement with normative concerns relating to civic responsibility. We have already noted how our respondents' tendency to position themselves as responsible citizens through contrast to the imagined community of the British public might lead us to question whether the construct of citizenship should be equated with the construct of national identity in any straightforward way. Similarly, the observation that our respondents could on occasions invoke norms of civility and civic responsibility to justify non-engagement in the formal political process might prompt us to question whether everyday understandings of responsible citizenship necessarily entail injunctions to political action.

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