Acquiring responsibilities and citizenship: social participation and social responsibilities

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Introduction

Young people’s transitions to adulthood can be understood as a process of developing citizenship in which, over time, young people become eligible to enjoy the rights and to exercise the obligations and responsibilities associated with citizenship. It is also a pivotal period in the process of ‘citizenship-identity formation’, a period during which (children and) young people have been described as ‘learner citizens’ (Arnot & Dillabough, 2000: 12) or ‘citizens in the making’ (Marshall, 1950: 25; Hall & Williamson, 1999). Such labels should not be read as a denial of young people’s citizenship status but more as indicator of the ways in which, more than at other points of the life-course, the relationship to citizenship is in a state of flux. For young people, in particular, therefore, citizenship can be understood as ‘as much a transitional process as an outcome status achieved at a particular stage of life’ (Bynner, 1997: 238). It is a process that young people actively negotiate but within structural constraints, which shape citizenship as an exclusionary as well as an inclusive force.

The paper aims to provide an analytical framework for thinking about how young people in Europe become citizens and acquire the responsibilities associated with citizenship. It draws on both theoretical work and on empirical evidence about young people’s participation, in particular from an on-going longitudinal study of 110 young people aged 16 to 23 in the East Midlands city of Leicester, which is part of the UK ESRC ‘Youth, Citizenship and Social Change’ programme.

The paper begins with a discussion of citizenship as a status (involving formal rights and obligations) and as a practice (involving political participation in both formal and informal modes of politics and the responsibilities associated with unpaid forms of work in the home and community). These conceptions reflect the two main historical citizenship traditions of rights-based liberalism and political participation-promoting civic republicanism, as well as a more recent, third, communitarian strand, which has provided the basis for a more generalised appeal to citizenship obligations and responsibilities.

The paper then argues for a synthesis of rights and participation approaches based on the notion of ‘agency’. This encourages a construction of young people as active agents, negotiating the processes of developing citizenship and citizenship-identity formation, but within the constraints created by economic, social and cultural divisions. These negotiations can be understood through the lens of what Hall and Williams describe as ‘lived citizenship’, that is “the meaning that citizenship actually has in people’s lives and the ways in which people’s social and cultural backgrounds and material circumstances affect their lives as citizens” (1999: 2).
Thus, the nature of ‘lived citizenship’ will vary within societies and also between societies, reflecting their particular citizenship traditions. As Birte Siim puts it in her recent book on *Gender and Citizenship*, “citizenship is a contextualised concept” (2000: 1). The reading of young people’s citizenship in this paper is heavily coloured by the UK context, although it attempts to paint in the shades of young people’s experiences of citizenship in other European countries for which information was available.

1. Citizenship as a status

Rights

The notion of ‘lived citizenship’ is important when considering citizenship as a status conferring rights, as it reminds us that there can be a gap between *de jure* and *de facto* rights, that is between formal rights and their enjoyment in practice. Following T. H. Marshall, the status of citizenship is conventionally understood in terms of civil, political and social rights. Today, theorists and activists argue for new forms of rights such as reproductive and cultural rights and the right of participation in decision-making (which forms a bridge to citizenship as a practice). Young people access different citizenship rights at different ages in different countries and even within countries. The distinction between formal rights and their realisation as part of what Maxine Molyneux (2000: 122) terms ‘really existing citizenship’ is likely to be of particular significance for young people who will be trying to exercise these rights for the first time.

Obligations

The relationship between the rights and obligations of citizenship has become a critical issue in the face of the increasing dominance of ‘a duties discourse’ (Roche, 1992: 49) in political debate. In both Anglo-Saxon and Continental European countries, paid work obligations are to a greater or less extent being elevated to the status of the citizenship obligation, upon which social rights are conditional. Work has also been described as “a major form of social participation” (Leisink & Coenen, 1993: 6). In an essay on work and citizenship in the New Europe, Leisink and Coenen argue that “through their very work individuals constitute themselves as members of society. However, significant differences which go into the make-up of work, notably the difference between paid work and unpaid work as well as the internal differentiation of paid work, determine the differential nature of social membership through work” (ibid: 8).

A central question for young people’s citizenship is their relationship to a labour market, which offers many of them little prospect of secure, long-term employment. According to the European Commission, “for the Union as a whole and in most Member States, young people less than 25 years of age are more than twice as likely as people aged 25 and over to be unemployed”, the one exception being in Germany (Eurostat/European Commission, 2001: 86). The Commission also draws attention to how generally young people enter the labour market at a later age than previously. Both these aspects of young people’s relationship to the labour market have implications for the economic independence traditionally associated with adult citizenship (Jones & Wallace, 1992) and hence for the speed of the passage from adolescence to mature citizenship.
Research suggests that negative experiences in the labour market can, not surprisingly, lead to negative attitudes among young people towards paid work and towards the idea that it represents an obligation of citizenship (France, 1998; Bentley & Oakley, 1999). Yet, in our study in Leicester, we found a positive stance towards paid employment, even among a majority of those in a marginalised economic situation. Moreover, the majority recognised and agreed with the notion of responsibility and in particular the responsibility to be in employment, training or education. Only a small group saw employment not as a responsibility but as necessary to avoid the ‘crap lifestyle’ associated with unemployment or experienced the idea of work obligations as coercive.

2. Citizenship as a practice

Unpaid work

The preoccupation of many governments with paid work obligations has been criticised by feminists and others as devaluing the contribution to citizenship made by unpaid forms of work, namely family care work and voluntary and community work. In some countries young mothers tend to be constructed as a problem or even a threat, rather than as young citizens raising the next generation of citizens (Duncan & Edwards, 1997; Lewis, 1997). The extent to which young carers of disabled family members are shouldering adult citizenship responsibilities is all too often overlooked. Yet, according to an exploratory cross-national European study, in many families across Europe, children and young people help to provide care in the community (Becker, 1995).

My focus here, though, is voluntary and community work, as an important expression of social participation, which arguably in some cases can, like care work, represent a more valuable contribution to society than some forms of paid work. In the UK, the Government extols the virtues of voluntary work as an expression of good citizenship especially for young people. The Home Secretary has, for example, recently argued that volunteering “is one of the most important aspects of citizenship” (Blunkett, 2001: 4). Earlier in 1998, the Lord Chancellor suggested in a speech that “one of the best ways of putting the theories of citizenship into practice is through voluntary work in the community. … Volunteering can foster young people’s sense of belonging; belonging to the community, developing their understanding of the rights and duties they have as citizens”. However, the Government also makes it clear that volunteering should not be regarded as an alternative to paid work and the benefit regulations are designed to ensure that it does not function as such.

A study in nine European countries in the mid-1990s found considerable variation in levels of volunteering among under-24 year olds, ranging from only 5% in Slovakia to 42% in Ireland. The average overall was 25% (Gaskin & Davis-Smith, 1995). Research in the UK reveals relatively high levels of involvement in and support for voluntary activities, among young people, not all of which is always picked up in official volunteering statistics (Roker et al., 1999). A study of over 1,100 young people, undertaken in three schools in different parts of England, indicated “a high level of involvement in volunteering and campaigning activities”, which, the researchers claim, “refutes the stereotype of young people as uninvolved and apathetic” (Roker et al., 1999: 49). One in eight was involved regularly and over three-quarters overall were classified as having some involvement. Roker, Player
and Coleman comment that “what was common to the vast majority of volunteers and campaigners, regardless of what activity they were actually involved in, was the way in which their activity stimulated social and political thought, and contributed to identity development”. In this way such participation contributed “to the development of citizenship understanding among young people” (Roker et al., 1999: 53-4).

In our own study in Leicester, about three-quarters of participants had experience of some kind of voluntary activity, although current engagement was more widespread among the younger than older participants. The suggestion that the Government is equating voluntary work with ‘good citizenship’ drew mixed responses, which tended to reflect more general attitudes towards voluntary work. Reasons given for non-involvement in voluntary work tended to focus on demands of work and study as well as sports and social activities amongst those who were in higher education or graduate type jobs. Some of those without post-school education and in a marginalised economic position said that they were not willing to work without payment, expressing incredulity or even anger at the thought of working for nothing.

Those who participated in voluntary work saw it as good for communities, the environment and society generally and many found it personally satisfying. There was a belief that it provided an opportunity to take action on social issues, often with real constructive effect. There was, in some cases, a sense of personal agency, which was more evident than when talking about the formal political process. This echoed the findings of an earlier, synthesising, national study in which a consensus emerged among young people that the best way to change things in society was through voluntary organisations. These were seen as offering “a route to social and political action, distinct from and vastly preferred to mainstream politics” (Gaskin, Vlaeminke & Fenton, 1996: 14).

Here, voluntary action shades into informal politics and points to a broader notion of politics than in more traditional formulations, which have focused on the formal political system. Such narrow constructions of politics have been challenged for some years by, among others, feminists and those concerned with young people’s political participation. It is important, therefore, to consider both formal and informal modes of politics.

**Formal politics**

It appears to be a common refrain across European societies that young people are opting out of participation in the formal political system. For example, in Germany discussion “about how young people relate to politics has been dominated by the thesis that the young generation had become disenchanted with politics and unwilling to get involved” (Gaiser, 1999). In Finland “there has been a drastic decline in young people’s voting activities during the last decades. The turnout of voters aged between 18 and 30 participating in national elections has plummeted” (Paakkunainen, undated). In the UK there has been considerable concern about what is perceived as young people’s political apathy. This concern has intensified following the 2001 General Election in which only 39% of those aged 18 to 24 voted (compared with an overall turn-out of 59%, which itself was the lowest since full universal suffrage) (The Independent, 4 July, 2001).
There is some disagreement as to whether young people’s disengagement from formal politics is primarily a generational or a life-cycle phenomenon. On the basis of the annual *British Social Attitudes Survey*, Alison Park concludes that “it is premature to assume that a significant generational shift in political engagement is taking place” (1999: 37). However, she points to possible evidence of a shift in attitudes in relation to voting as a civic duty. The BSAS found only a third of under-25 year olds believed voting is a civic obligation compared to around two-thirds of those aged 25 to 55 and nearly four-fifths of the over-55s.

There was little support for treating voting as a social obligation in our own study. One of the most forcefully made arguments was that it is more irresponsible to vote in ignorance than not at all. One 16 year old young woman of Indian origin, for instance, said that “if I was a bad citizen, I’d go to the voting poll and just tick any names. Not knowing what I was ticking – that would make me a bad citizen”. What also came across quite strongly was the widespread lack of political knowledge, both in terms of what the political parties stand for and the basic mechanics of voting. There was a tendency to see politics as only relevant to adults and in particular adult taxpayers.

Those who had remained in education or entered graduate type employment were generally more positive about voting than those who had left school with few or no qualifications, although they also expressed fairly high levels of ambivalence. Nevertheless, they were more likely to perceive the vote as giving them a say and to argue that those who do not vote cannot then complain about the government. Some also referred to historical struggles for the vote.

Those with few or no qualifications tended to link their lack of belief in the importance of voting with dissatisfaction with the political system (see also White et al., 2000). They saw politics as boring, irrelevant and confusing and they lacked faith in the effectiveness of the vote and in politicians and government. As one white 22 year old young man put it: “You might as well be voting for the wind itself. It does a lot more for people than the government ever will.”

This sense of disengagement from the formal political system appeared to reflect more general feelings of marginalisation as citizens. A number of those with few or no qualifications identified with the label of ‘second class citizen’ and they were more likely not to identify themselves as citizens at all. At the same time, the denial of the vote until 18 was itself perceived as exclusion from full citizenship by some of the young people. One 16 year old suggested that if they could vote, under-18 year olds would be more likely to “feel like they belonged to something”. Following the 2001 Election, the Carnegie UK Trust called for the lowering of the voting age to 16, pointing to a survey that found that 71% of 16 to 24 year olds want a greater say in decisions that affect them (*The Guardian*, 27 June, 2001).

Overall, the picture painted is not one of apathetic youth but of serious disengagement from the political system, particularly among economically marginalised young people who have little knowledge about or confidence in the formal democratic process. Henn et al. (forthcoming), on the basis of another study of young people’s political participation in the East Midlands, likewise conclude “that
young people today are ‘engaged sceptics’ – they are interested in political affairs, but distrustful of those who are elected to positions of power”. Such interpretations are reinforced by the greater interest shown in informal community-based politics.

Informal politics
Only three of the 110 young people in our study had played an active role in party politics. In contrast, approaching three-fifths had some experience of informal political action, broadly defined, including involvement in informal community or single issue politics, even if this was often only on a sporadic or one-off basis. Examples were activities in the Asian community; participation in women’s or environmental groups and youth councils; advocacy for disabled people; petitions and demonstrations and some examples of local direct action, such as sit-ins to campaign for safer roads. Young, economically marginalised, women were particularly likely to have had some involvement.

In general the young people were much more optimistic about community or campaign politics than about voting as a means of effecting change. The contrast was most marked among those with few or no qualifications and Asian participants were particularly likely to express confidence in the effectiveness of informal politics. Formal politics was more likely to be seen as hindering than facilitating the ability to make a difference, because of the perception that government does not respond adequately to people’s efforts to bring about change.

A Youth Survey in Germany likewise found that “more directly problem-oriented and non-institutionalised” forms of participation “play a very considerable role in the young citizens’ repertoire of political activities” (although it found stronger support for voting as a means of exerting political influence than is suggested in the UK) (Gaiser, 1999). In Finland, it has been suggested that young people’s “commitment to politics and conventional political participation may not be so strong or active as their parents’ but their readiness for political protest and unconventional expression has grown. Young people are clearly more prepared for radical forms of action – even illegal demonstrations – than the mythical young people of the 1960s” (Paakkunainen, undated).

Such forms of action have been described as ‘dissident citizenship’:
the practices of marginalised citizens who publicly contest prevailing arrangements of power by means of oppositional democratic practices that augment or replace institutionalised channels of democratic opposition when those channels are inadequate or unavailable. Instead of voting, lobbying, or petitioning, dissident citizens constitute alternative public spaces through practices such as marches, protests, and picket lines; sit-ins, slow-downs, and cleanups; speeches, strikes, and street theatre (Sparks, 1997: 75).

As we have seen with recent anti-globalisation protests, some young people are more likely to practice dissident citizenship than conventional ballot-box citizenship.

3. Agency and identity

Agency
Citizenship political participation, in various forms, can be understood as an expression of human agency. The notion of human agency is, I have argued
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elsewhere (Lister, 1997), pivotal to bridging the traditional divide between an understanding of citizenship as a status and a practice. Citizenship as rights enables people to participate in the practice of citizenship, both individually and collectively. Rights are not fixed. They remain the object of citizenship struggles to defend, reinterpret and extend them. Examples with particular significance for young people include the voting age and the age of consent for young gay men. Who is involved in those struggles, where they are placed in the political hierarchy and the power and influence they can yield will help to determine how rights develop. In this way, citizenship as a status and a practice interact dialectically.

However, citizenship as a status is not dependent upon citizenship as a practice. We need therefore to distinguish between what it means, on the one hand, to be a citizen in the formal sense i.e. to enjoy the rights of citizenship and, on the other, to act as a citizen, i.e. to fulfil the potential of the status through the exercise of agency. Some young people act as citizens before they enjoy the full panoply of citizenship rights; some others, like adults, do not fulfil the potential for a variety of reasons (although they may do so at other points in their lives). They do not, however, cease to be citizens as a result.

This dialectical relationship between citizenship as a status and a practice is shaped by the constraints and opportunities created by economic, social and political structures. The interplay between structure and agency is a recurrent theme in the literature on youth transitions to adulthood (Banks et al., 1992; Jones and Wallace, 1992; Coles, 1995; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). There has been a discursive shift from a metaphor of ‘trajectories’, with its structuralist connotations, to that of ‘navigations’, which places greater emphasis on individual negotiation of risk and uncertainty (Evans & Furlong, 1997). The challenge now is to understand the interaction between individual agency and structural factors such as divisions of class, gender and ‘race’, which advantage some and disadvantage others as they negotiate the transitions to adult citizenship.

Moreover, the nature of this interaction will vary according to the cultural, institutional and citizenship context of different European societies. As Nagel and Wallace point out, “young people in different parts of Europe face different kinds of ‘structure’ in terms of institutionalised traditions in education and training systems and also in terms of labour markets [to which we might add political systems]. Different familial and cultural expectations impinge upon them and the degree of agency or scope for progressive individualisation may differ” (1997: 42).

Identity
Culture and the expectations it engenders “mediates between the personal level of agency and the structural level of social institutions and processes” (Pugh & Thompson, 1999: 25) in the weaving of the fabric of ‘lived citizenship’. Indeed, the concept of ‘cultural citizenship’ has become increasingly prominent in the citizenship literature (see, for instance, Stevenson, 2001; Isin and Wood, 1999). It represents, according to Jan Pakulski, “a new set of citizenship claims that involve the right to unhindered and legitimate representation, and propagation of identities and lifestyles through the information systems and public fora” (1997: 80).
How young people see themselves represented in the ‘adult world’ is likely to impact on their sense of themselves as emergent citizens during what can be understood as a pivotal period in the process of citizenship-identity formation. This process has implications for their sense of belonging to or membership of a particular citizenship collectivity, which in turn is likely to impact on the nature and extent of their participation as citizens.

Conover, Crewe and Searing have described citizenship as “a fundamental identity that helps situate the individual in society. … To say that people think of themselves as citizens is to suggest that they have a self-schema which intricately links their sense of self to their notion of what it means to be a citizen” (1991: 805). Insofar as traditional formulations represent citizenship as an identity it is a universalistic, civic, rather than particular identity. According to Derek Heater, this means that it is “political identity par excellence”, overlaying potentially divisive particular identities (1990: 184). Yet, like other identities citizenship identity is constructed and evolves in particular communities (local, national and supra-national) and it is possible to identify processes of differential and multiple citizenship identity formation, which reflect particular group identities and structural locations (Hobson & Lindholm, 1997; Isin & Wood, 1999; Stevenson, 2001).

Citizenship is not a free-floating identity but is rooted in specific locales and institutional bases. Hall, Coffey and Williamson, for example, draw attention to “how young people’s need for space, and their emergent sense of place, are aspects of a citizenship identity which young people ‘learn’, work at and negotiate over in their leisure time” (1999: 501, 1998). For some young people, local rather than national communities may be more important as the locus of citizenship identity and participation (Hall et al., 1999; France, 1998).

Moreover, how young people feel as citizens or as ‘citizens in the making’ may shift according to institutional context, such as educational institution, the workplace, the social security system, community organisations, social movement groups. Schools, both generally and more specifically through citizenship education, have an important role to play in the construction of citizens and citizenship identities (Arnot & Dillabough, 2000; Lister et al., 2001). In the Leicester study we found that, for the most part, the schools had done little to prepare the young people for participation as political citizens and a number of them said that they wished they had learned about voting at school.

Overall, of 56 who expressed a view, 32 identified themselves as citizens, five as partial citizens, six were uncertain and 13 said that they did not feel like citizens. As noted earlier, those in a marginalised economic situation were less likely to identify themselves as citizens than were those who had stayed in education. There was a broad gender balance. Although numbers were small, Asian participants appeared rather more willing to identify themselves as citizens, sometimes with reference to being a ‘British citizen’.

When asked about national identity, all Asian participants described themselves as British but most also referred to their Indian background. White participants found it harder to talk about national identity and what it meant to them and frequently used
‘British’ and ‘English’ as interchangeable terms. Other research in the UK has indicated how many young people from minority ethnic groups and also lesbian and gay young people describe themselves in terms of ‘a combination identity’ such as British Asian (Industrial Society, 1997). Similarly, it reveals “a widespread sense … of there being different levels of belonging and identification”, rather than a strong sense of national identity as such among young people (Bentley & Oakley, 1999: 53).

This sense of different levels of belonging and of combination or hyphenated identities can also be understood as an expression of increasingly multi-tiered notions of citizenship, embracing the local, through the regional to the national and from there to the supra-national (such as the European Union) and the global. The making of EU citizenship is in part about the promotion of a European identity (Wiener, 1999) and a number of programmes are directed specifically towards encouraging young people to see themselves as active European citizens (European Commission, 1998). Eurobarometer indicates, however, that age is not a significant factor in whether or not people consider themselves to be European (Kohli, 2000).

In an earlier European Value Study, people generally were more likely to say they belonged to the world than to Europe. As Martin Kohli observes, “Europe as a focus of attachment is increasingly pressured by what lies beyond: by a global or universal human identity” (Kohli, 2000: 123). It is possible that the young people who participate in supra-national campaigns, such as those around globalisation and world poverty issues, are more likely than other people to identify themselves in this way. As such they may represent emergent global citizens (even if they do not themselves necessarily use a discourse of global citizenship). However, the idea of globalism did not spark any interest among the young people in our own study.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to throw light on the question of young people’s acquisition of responsibilities and citizenship drawing on both citizenship theory and empirical evidence, mainly from the UK. Both theory and empirical research need to acknowledge the importance of ‘lived citizenship’ (Hall & Williams, 1999) to understanding how young people themselves make sense of and negotiate their transitional status as ‘citizens in the making’. They do so within structural constraints, which exist within all European societies but the exact impact of which will reflect national and cultural particularities and those associated with a range of social divisions such as class, gender, disability and ‘race’.

Bibliography


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3 For an account of the inconsistencies in the ages at which the rights and responsibilities associated with adult citizenship are conferred in a British context see Jones and Bell (2000).
4 A national poll, conducted for the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, likewise found that a higher percentage of 16–18 year olds than older young people gave their time to charity (NCVO press release, 9 February, 2000).
5 For an alternative attempt to bridge this divide through the notion of ‘republican liberalism’ see Dagger (1997).
6 Other divisions that are likely to have an impact are those associated with disability, sexuality and, in some societies, religion.
Social responsibility and ethics are necessary to live and work in a way that accounts for the welfare of people and of the environment. If this equilibrium is maintained, then social responsibility is accomplished. What it Means to be Socially Responsible and Ethical? The theory of social responsibility is built on a system of ethics, in which decisions and actions must be ethically validated before proceeding. If the action or decision causes harm to society or the environment, then it would be considered to be socially irresponsible. Moral values that are inherent in society create a distinction between right and wrong. In this way, social fairness is believed (by most) to be in the “right,” but more frequently than not this Corporate social responsibility (CSR) refers to the efforts made by a company to improve society and contribute towards sustainable development. Also known as corporate conscience or corporate citizenship, CSR describes initiatives run by a business to evaluate and take responsibility for their impact on a number of issues ranging from human rights to the environment. Corporate social responsibility is a type of self-regulatory business plan, with initiatives focusing on achieving economic, social and environmental benefits for all stakeholders involved (employees, consumers, investors and oth