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Young people, place and devolved politics: perceived scale(s) of political concerns among under 18s living in Wales

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Abstract

Despite clear linkages between conceptualisations and perceptions of politics, society, culture and territorial rescaling, research into young people's political engagement, participation and representation is underrepresented in the field of social and cultural geography. Here the gap is addressed using perceptions of devolved politics, as a form of territorial rescaling, among young people living in Wales. Specifically it shows the geographical scales at which young people locate their political concerns and where responsibility for these concerns is perceived to lie, with a focus on the National Assembly for Wales and the Welsh Government. This is a key contribution to our understanding of the role devolution plays in youth political engagement in-light of the following: the relative infancy of the devolved UK institutions; their asymmetrical development and increasing divergences; the growing variation in turnout among young people for different types of election and referenda; and the lack of research examining the youth engagement dimension of Welsh devolution as a political, social and cultural process of territorial rescaling in the UK.

The paper concludes with a critique of notion that devolution poses a politics of hope for youth political engagement in Wales, a very different picture to Scotland.

Introduction

This paper examines geographical scale(s) of political concerns among young people living in Wales, linked with the scales of governance at which responsibility for these concerns is perceived to lie. The aim is to highlight differences in attitudes to devolution within and between groups of young people living in Wales through exploring the scale at which their perceptions of politics are located. In doing so the paper contributes to a growing body of literature on devolution, as a form of territorial rescaling, and political engagement among young people. In part it responds to a call from Mills and Duckett (2016) for the inclusion of devolution in empirical studies by geographers of youth studies. They argue that while much research into youth engagement and political geography incorporates national scales, the focus of enquiry remains at either local or global scales of influence and subsequently *'...devolution has been neglected...' (2016: 2).*

In its response this paper makes two key contributions to the field of social and cultural geography. Firstly, by taking a scalar approach to the well debated explanations for young people's low democratic engagement within the political sciences. Such explanations have shifted (to and) from life-cycle to cohort approaches since the 1990s, and from 'attitudinal' or 'youth-focused' such as disinterest, scepticism or engaged cynicism (Kimberlee, 2002) to 'policy-focused' such as a lack of political party representation for young people and low levels of trust in the establishment (Wring, Henn and Weinstein, 1999; Henn and Foard, 2012). More recent research has questioned conventional wisdom around youth alienation by stating that young British Millennials are unusually disengaged, apathetic and un-alienated compared with other generations due to their high levels of trust in government and the increase in forums through which they are able to engage (Fox, 2015). However, none of these studies take multi-scalar or multi-levels of governance, such as devolution, into account. This paper goes some

way towards addressing the gap by looking at youth political engagement through a human geography lens. In addition, while literature linking youth political engagement with devolution exists, for the most part it relates to Scotland and often stems from the extension of voting franchise to 16 and 17 year olds in the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 (Eichhorn, 2015). This paper introduces Wales to the debate and broadens the conceptualisation of 'politics' to include the socio-cultural and geographical. In doing so it offers a critique of devolution as a 'politics of hope' (Hopkins, 2015a) for youth engagement, when applied to Welsh devolution. In reference to devolved Scottish politics Hopkins writes:

For over ten years now, a small group of scholars have been emphasising the ways in which young people are a part of, rather than apart from, politics and political geographies (Hopkins, 2015a, p. 91)

And goes on to state:

The Scottish Independence Referendum demonstrates … the ways that a politics of hope may be harnessed to maximise youth political participation (Hopkins 2015a, p. 92)

This paper argues that a politics of hope for youth engagement may not necessarily apply to devolution in Wales as it is claimed to do in Scotland. This argument is made following the enactment of the Wales Bill 2017 allowing the Welsh Government to lower the voting age for devolved elections to 16, and a National Assembly campaign for a Youth Parliament in Wales. In Wales, since 1999 a weaker constitutional arrangement than Scotland has caused devolution to lag in terms of expectation and performance; far from what Yes campaigners called-for in the run-up to the 1997 referenda (Andrews, 1999). This, among other factors, explains a lower

public awareness of the National Assembly for Wales in Wales than of the Scottish Parliament in Scotland; and a very different political context in which to examine devolution as a politics of hope for youth engagement.

Secondly, the paper adds a youth dimension to existing studies into public attitudes towards devolution in Wales (most notably the work of Scully and Jones, 2015). When considering the 18 years which has passed since the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales, coupled with the idea of devolved institutions justifying their own existence (Kay, 2003), it is reasonable to expect relatively high levels of diffuse (deep-rooted) support for devolution among young people who have not known a time before. However, levels of diffuse support for devolution are low amongst the general Welsh population (Scully and Jones, 2015) and recent survey results show young Welsh people to be less supportive of increasing Welsh devolved powers than older age groups, and more supportive of the status quo (Scully, 2014). While these results show similar levels of political (dis)engagement between young people in Wales and the UK, they are in contention with the purported 'closer interface between state and society' promised by advocates of Welsh devolution (Chaney, 2016; Andrews, 1999); and the politics of hope for youth engagement observed in Scottish devolution (Hopkins, 2015a). With these contradictions in mind this paper explores self-reported scale(s) of political concerns among under 18s living in Wales and the scales of governance at which responsibility for these concerns is perceived to lie. The aim is to drill deeper into our understanding of the low levels of support for devolution among (young) people in Wales by looking at the social and cultural associations of young people's political concerns, and who or what they perceive to be responsible for tackling them. In doing so the paper adds a nuanced picture of young people's attitudes to the National Assembly for Wales and the Welsh Government to the well-researched fields of youth political engagement and Welsh devolution.

The paper begins by framing arguments for spatially based claims to identity using the work of Paasi (2013), Billig (1995) and the distinction between material coherence and imagined coherence made by Jones, Orford, Heley, and Macfarlane (2015, p. 145). Material coherence refers to *'... the institutional structures that hold a locality together and provide vehicles for collective action (2015, p. 145),* while imagined coherence refers to a sense of identity beyond the lived experience. This distinction is located within a focus on the meaning behind claims to spatially based identity, rather than the claim itself. This section of the paper draws links between institutions, scale and identity applied specifically to young people and Welsh devolution later in the paper.

The paper goes on to highlight a gap in literature explaining the impact of devolution on youth engagement and conceptions of politics. While much has been written on youth engagement in devolved politics and independence in relation to Scotland, less attention has been paid to Wales. With this in mind the paper outlines the Welsh context and the difficulty of realising devolution as a 'politics of hope' for youth engagement in relation to Wales. It also critiques the notion of devolution creating 'a closer interface' between state and society in the context of youth political engagement in Wales. With high expectations for devolution and low public support for a Welsh Government compared to Scotland, the issue of devolved political engagement among future generations is crucial to understand. However, little research exists on scales of political identification among under 18s living in Wales.

The findings address identified gaps in the literature using the research question 'at what scale do young people living in Wales identify with political issues and institutions?' The themes emerging from responses to this question reveal new insight into the young peoples'

perceptions of sub and supra national socio-political issues in relation to Wales and the role of the Welsh Government in tackling them.

Spatially based claims to political orientation

Paasi's (2013) research into regional identity in the Finnish planning profession, using the work of Brubaker and Cooper (2000) and Bourdieu (1999) among others, emphasises the use of language in the production of identity and its construction through the discourse of politicians, academics and professionals to create a 'collective image'. This collective image or identity can be understood through individual political issues of concern at different scales of geography and governance. Indeed, identity and political issues are closely linked within literature on devolution in all nations of the UK (Balsom, 1985; English, 2007; English, 2011; and Keating, 2009, 2014).

Paasi's findings show while individual perceptions of political issues of concern can be based on shared behaviours or geo-historical reference points, these are not the same as the direct connections and interactions which form, what Jones, Orford, Heley, and Macfarlane (2015) term 'material coherence'. Rather, (re)conceptualisations and lived experiences of politics at once overlap, contrast and coincide with the social, the cultural, laws, processes and institutions of governance ruling the bounded spaces within which they are experienced, formed and reformed. Termed a dialectical duality by Jessop (2008) the strategic relation between structures and actors forming the 'fuzzy' line between state and society are in a continuous state of flux. While tangible connections and interactions may form a key part of an individual's identity they may also be superseded by networks and relations outside of them (Paasi 2013) and in many cases ideologically-rooted notions of lived experience over material. Devolution,

facilitating a potentially 'closer' geographical scale in which to locate one's political, social and cultural claims to identity, adds another layer of complexity to the formation of identity. However, as Billig (1995) outlines below it is possible to shed light on the complexities through study of the meaning behind spatially based conceptions of identity.

> *'Thus, rather than asking questions about what regional identity is, it is more relevant to scrutinize carefully what it means to claim (in speech and in written texts) that the notion of identity applies to a given territorial space' (Billig, 1995 in Paasi 2013, p. 1209)*

Debate on central ruling forces and the reconceptualisation of boundaries, have developed significantly since 1997 in-line with the advent of devolved powers from central government to Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish national assemblies. A flurry of literature on governance, governing and debates reconceptualising the state, set within what was seen as the decline of the nation state, ensued (Rhodes, 1997; Marston and Smith 2001; Brenner, 2004; Jones, Goodwin, Jones and Simpson 2004; Jones, Goodwin, Jones and Pett 2005; Rhodes, 2007). In this flurry devolution in the UK has been described as 'hollowing-out', whereby central ruling forces distribute power and responsibility to public and private bodies through devolution 'upwards' to supra-national states such as the EU and 'downwards' to local authorities and arms-length delivery bodies (Roberts and Devine 2003). Jessop (2001) explains hollowing-out through three processes. Firstly, 'destatisation' which is the decline of the national state and the subsequent move from 'a' government to forces of governance or governing beyond the state. Secondly, 'internationalisation' whereby populations begin to identify at sub and supra national scales, for example with local community. Finally, 'denationalisation' a process of territorial rescaling whereby state capacities move from national to sub-national, supra-national

and local. In response to Jessop's definition authors have described all three as a form of 'filling-in', referring broadly to the establishment of new state spaces (Jones, Goodwin, Jones and Pett, 2005), for example 'spaces of regionalism' (Jones and MacLeod 2004). Jones, Goodwin, Jones and Pett's (2005) study of devolution in the UK uses the Education and Learning Wales body, established under the Welsh Government to improve workforce skills, as a case study. They argue, contrary to hollowing-out, that the declining significance of the nation state and subsequent decentralisation has led to a process of 'filling-in' whereby new state spaces are created and established to extend state power. Contradictions, inequalities and uneven development characterise territorial rescaling and are interwoven with transitional conceptualisations of territorial identity among those living within these devolved spaces in both notions of hollowing-out and filling-in (Jones, Goodwin, Jones and Simpson, 2004).

Here the findings on scale(s) of concerns and governance are located within bounded notions of or claims to political identity and the extent to which perceptions of devolved government are based on day to day experiences or superseded by connections and events outside of them. Taking Paasi's (2013) use of Billig's (1995) approach to understanding attachment to territory and Jones, Orford, Heley, and Macfarlane's (2015) division between 'material' and 'imagined' coherence, this paper sheds some light on what it means to apply identity to a given space, giving a snapshot in time and space of self-reported political concerns. Thus allowing exploration into choice of political representation for a richer analysis.

> *'Geographers have illustrated and elucidated how discursive meanings around the 'place' of the nation are shaped by everyday representations, landscapes and sites of memory, for example…film, ceremonies, and material culture (Edensor, 2002),*

monuments (Johnson, 1995), architecture (Lorimer, 2001), streets and public space

(Azaryahu, 1997)…' (Mills and Duckett 2016, p. 3)

The construction of self through political, social and cultural representations within geographical parameters, divided into material and imagined coherence (Jones, Orford, Heley, and Macfarlane, 2015), are applied in the following sections to young people's perceptions of 'politics' and Welsh devolution.

Geographies of youth engagement and devolution

Political geographers have shown territorial rescaling and delineation of boundaries to be strong explanatory factors for political perceptions among publics (Keating, 2014; Brenner, 2008; Delaney, 2005). While the political geographies of children and young people are well researched (Bushin and White, 2010; Skelton, 2010, 2013; Mills, 2013) including in relation to Welsh national identity and nationalism (Jones, Merriman, and Mills, 2016), the way devolution as a diverging and asymmetrical scale of governance shapes these debates is less well explored. Indeed Skelton states that *'Political Geography needs to recognise that young people are political actors now; they are not political subjects 'in-waiting''* (2010, p. 146).

While authors such as Hopkins (2015a) have explored the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 in relation to young people, devolution and specifically extending the voting franchise to create a *'…'politics of hope' [which] may be harnessed to maximise youth political participation'* (2015a, p. 1); such claims require further unpicking. Indeed Mills and Ducket (2016) point to a gap in our current understanding of the impact of devolution on youth

engagement and call for further investigation into how devolution has changed perceptions of politics among young people:

> *'…most of the opportunities and challenges for young people living in the UK to engage 'politically' are increasingly influenced or shaped by the geographies of devolution…'* *(Mills and Ducket 2016, p. 2)*

Specifically, as outlined above, political engagement among young people is most extensively researched within the political sciences which often excludes devolution. However, studies that cover youth political engagement using a social geographical lens have largely focused on Scotland. However, the binary nature of the Scottish independence referendum is arguably too narrow a focus for understanding young people's views on devolution more broadly, and further research is needed. For example, the surge in turnout among Scottish 6 and 17 year olds in September 2014 has led to concerns about the long-term implications of engaging young people through referenda, highlighting the need for further research. Mycock (2015) raises such concerns around the issue-based vote:

> *'The Scottish independence referendum was often febrile and divisive, schooling younger citizens in a form of binary politics that was deeply adversarial, reductive, and contentious. The legacy of the referendum is that many young Scots now associate democratic engagement with the bipolarity of Scottish politics.'* *(Mycock 2015, p. 1)*

Another difficulty lies in separating democratic *participation* (in devolved elections, for example), *perception* of devolved institution(s) and perceived levels of *representation* among

young people. While surveys can give us valuable knowledge on all three, the complex links between them remain unclear.

Youth engagement in a 'closer' devolved political context

The National Assembly for Wales was established in 1999 and functioned without significant policy making powers until 2011. This, coupled with the late separation between the legislative (National Assembly for Wales) and executive (Welsh Government) also in 2011, meant the institution operated effectively as a large local authority for its first decade. The Richard Commission established in 2002 to investigate the 'Powers and Electoral Arrangements of the National Assembly for Wales' recommended policy-making powers in 2004, arguing that the Assembly was compromised by its weak constitutional arrangement. The recommendations were enacted in 2011 following a referendum. The same year saw the establishment of the Silk Commission to examine devolution of fiscal powers and increasing powers to the Assembly. The commission recommended a budget increase which was enacted in 2014 and the power to vary and raise taxes, both of which are planned for 2018 and 2020 respectively. The Wales Bill 2017 underwent long-winded redrafting over several years with contentious moderations to the reserved powers approach before enactment. In short Welsh devolution has been slow and the institution is continuously pushing on the boundaries imposed by its initially weak constitutional structures. This is one explanatory factor as to why the Welsh population has less awareness of a National Assembly for Wales than the Scottish population has of a Scottish Parliament. Despite this, there have been not insignificant and distinctive policy variations in Wales, the most relevant of which for this paper relate to young people.

In terms of youth engagement, the National Assembly for Wales is now free to enact its right to lower the voting age to 16 as detailed in the 2015 Saint David's Day Agreement for Wales under the Conservative-Lib Dem Coalition Government. Mixed messages from the Welsh Government are evident in relation to policies supporting young people. For example, on one hand Welsh Labour, in power in Wales since 1999, promotes policies that benefit young people such as apprenticeships and higher education funding support, emphasised here:

'...at a time when the Government's only offer to yet another generation of young people in Wales was a stark one: 'prepare to be left on the scrapheap'. Welsh Labour ...reached out to help them' (Tom Watson, Welsh Labour Annual Conference 21st February 2016)

On the other hand the independent Welsh Youth Assembly had its funding withdrawn in 2015 under Welsh Labour. In terms of civil society, since the establishment of a National Assembly for Wales, Welsh bodies representing young people have directed their lobbying and campaigning activities towards the Welsh Government. In this context Chaney's (2016) work on the interface between the Welsh state and civil society raises concerns. He argues that close relations between civil society organisations, such as those lobbying for young people, and devolved government in a one-party-state has led to a distortion of democratic civil participation. Whereby civil society-state interactions pivot around one political party.

More broadly while Welsh devolution came about as a result of complex, overlapping, socio-economic and political factors preceding the 1997 referendum, the principle of *'. . . bringing politics closer to the people, strengthening the rights of every citizen, making government more open and responsive'* (Prime Minister's Office, 1998: 84) was pivotal. In short a closer interface

between state and society. However, Chaney (2002) has also argues that while reconceptualization of governance through devolution raises the potential for increased civic participation in policy, this is not necessarily realised due to barriers, such as structures to facilitate partnerships without the relevant skills, common issues and communication needed to create meaningful or 'real' partnerships (2002, p. 31). From this we can hypothesise that while links between (some) representative youth organisations and the instruments of devolved governance in Wales have grown closer with devolution, this is not without its disparities. In the case of youth engagement this context is particularly important to consider. Here we turn to perceptions of devolution among young people living in Wales.

Youth engagement with Welsh devolution

Democratic participation in devolved elections is low among young people living in Wales. 18-24 year olds have the lowest turnout for Welsh devolved elections (39% in 2011) and the highest level of uncertainty around devolved politics compared with other age groups in Wales and young people in Scotland (Scully, 2013). Between 1997 and 2013 Welsh support for devolution has risen among the general population but plummeted among the younger generation (Evans and Williams, 2014). Among 18-35 year olds support went from 20% in 1997 to 8% in 2013, uncertain is increasing with around 14% not knowing what their constitutional preference for Wales was in 2013 compared to 9% in 1997 (Evans and Williams, 2014). However, a YouGov poll taken June-July 2016 showed support for independence was higher among 18-24 year olds in Wales, 21% compared with 10% of over 65s. The proportions shift slightly if independence were to mean Wales remaining in the EU, with 28% of 18-24 year olds supporting this. The shift is less prominent among over 65s, with 13% for independence when presented with the same scenario (YouGov, 2016). This indicates a lack

of diffuse support for devolution among young people but a slight increase in support for independence when it is a means to another political end. While the reasons for these patterns are not clear a qualitative study by Drakeford, Scourfield and Holland (2009) with 8-11 year olds in Wales sheds some light. They found notions of civic identity were present among the children, in the form of a shallowly-rooted sense of *'Welshness [that] is accompanied by sharper dimensions of civic awareness, in which localism matters most'* (2009, p. 263).

In summary, despite 18 years of devolved Welsh institutions, evidence shows low and uncertain support for Welsh devolution among young people living in Wales. However, we have neither a full account of why this is the case nor a clear idea of what motivates those young people who *are* supportive of devolution in Wales to engage. This paper seeks to close some of the gaps in knowledge by asking, 'at what scale do young people living in Wales identify with political *issues* and *institutions*?' In doing so it sheds light on young peoples' perceptions of devolution in the context of low democratic turnout and low support, using mixed methods to gather self-reported issues of political concern from under 18s, who have not known a time before devolution.

The findings are organised into three parts. The first shows broad attitudes to politics among a cohort of 14 to 17 year olds living in Wales, drawn from survey questions as context. The responses are analysed using the theory outlined above around spatially based claims to identity (Paasi 2013) and material or imagined coherence (Jones, Orford, Heley and McFarlane, 2015). Finally potential links between these conceptualisations are presented using qualitative data exploring political concerns among young people and their perceived links to devolution in Wales.

Methodology

The research takes a mixed methods approach beginning with a survey and followed by focus groups. Both phases of the study were conducted during 2015, before and after the UK general election, meaning participants' political scale(s) of concerns and responsibility are framed by this political event. While this does not detract from the findings on perceptions of devolved politics, it is possible to argue that framing views around the Welsh devolved elections of 2016 may have yielded different results. This is a limitation of the study, however, data from 18-24 year olds gathered by the Wales Elections Study (2016), shown in Table 2 below, highlights the broad similarities between preferences, addressing this concern to some extent. It is also reflected upon in relation to the findings in the final part of the concluding discussion.

The sample group for both survey and focus groups were aged 14 to 17 and living in Wales. The rationale behind choice of age group was largely the gap in youth political engagement on under 18s, however, three key points linked to the context outlined above also apply. Firstly, it increases the likelihood of respondents having lived in Wales for a substantial part, if not all, of their lives and not having known a time before devolution. Secondly, the group is old enough to be politically aware but too young to vote and is therefore arguably less represented in electoral statistics and by politicians than over 18s despite potentially having views on and being affected by politics. Finally, the group could be in or out of full time education allowing for comparison between those in school and those who have left for (un)employment, vocation or college and likely to be facing different, politically-rooted, adversities. In addition it is acknowledged that many respondents would have been eligible to vote in the 2016 devolved elections and the UK referendum on EU membership, which is also reflected upon in the concluding discussion.

The survey data were collected in April 2015 from 14 to 17 year olds in 13 Welsh secondary schools across Wales. Data were collected in classrooms through electronic tablets distributed to pupils during lesson time. Pupils were sampled through schools chosen for their diverse mix of geographical locations (rural, urban, valleys and town), geographically based levels of deprivation (Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2014) and their medium of instruction (six types on a scale from English medium to Welsh medium). Respondents were asked about their knowledge of politics and political parties.

The survey included one open question: *'are you concerned about one particular political issue?'*. 276 free text responses were coded using first and second cycle coding techniques (Salander, 2012) then analysed using Paasi's (2013) work and Jones, Orford, Heley, and Macfarlane's (2015) distinction between and material and imagined coherence. The reason for including a free text question was to understand conceptualisations of politics through subjective concerns and in doing so applying these concerns, in analysis, to the scale at which they relate. Applying a scale was not possible in every case but focus groups allowed further exploration of these answers.

The focus group method was chosen because it allows in-depth discussion and exploration of a broad range of viewpoints with multiple participants (Pearce, 2017; Barbour, 2013; Krueger, and Casey, 2008). This is important because 'young people' are at once labelled one homogenous group and are a diverse group of individuals with the same complex, multifaceted and socially influenced beliefs and viewpoints as any other age group. Something which can be unpicked through focus groups.

Recruitment was carried out with representatives from young people's organisations including: a charity for young people coming out of foster care; a young peoples' voluntary organisation; a young people's forum; an elected youth committee; and schools. Because of the geographical and territorial elements of the study, the aim was to recruit a mix of young people from urban and rural, and deprived and affluent backgrounds. The purpose of this sampling selection was twofold. Firstly, in order to include young people who are not necessarily politically engaged or who did not consider themselves to be politically engaged. Secondly, in order to include young people from a range of geographical locations. The links between living in Wales, poverty and devolution, key areas of concern within social geography, are something that this study aimed to capture both through approaching young people living in a deprived area and those outside of a school setting. 12 focus group respondents were also survey respondents.

Three focus groups took place with 29 young people all aged between 14 and 17 in Wales during July 2015. Focus group size varied in numbers from five to 12 and were categorised according to proxy indicators of geography, education and language. The first (group 1) took place in a youth club located in a 'deprived urban area' with five young people who had no proficiency in the Welsh language and had all left school at 16. The second (group 2) took place in a community centre in a 'deprived valleys area' with 12 young people, around half of whom spoke Welsh and around half of whom were still attending school or college. The third (group 3) took place in a school in an 'affluent urban area' with 12 young people who were fluent in Welsh and still in full time education. Ethical approval was granted and all young people who took part received information sheets and signed consent forms.

The nature and scale of self-reported political issues of concern

This section begins by presenting the survey results. Of 508 survey respondents, a majority of 289 (56.9%) thought they were well informed about current affairs and 165 (32.5%) did not. For 165 (34.3%) Facebook was the main source of information on current affairs, followed by TV or Radio (97, 20.2%) then Twitter (46, 9.6%), which is significant in terms of scales of conceptualising politics. The high proportion using social media to find out about current affairs frames the groups' orientation of political views within a bespoke form of online interaction whereby pages and feeds are populated by self-selected Friends and Followers, commonly referred to as an echo chamber of opinion. The finding also contradicts a study of an older age group (18-30) during the EU referendum which found TV to be the most common source of information (Pearce 2016). Information on current affairs for this age group is therefore likely to have been filtered by clusters of people with similar values, connections, backgrounds and acquaintances through networks that transcend geographical scale.

TABLE 1 HERE

Labour was the most popular political party (N=72, 14.2%) but coming well below the 'don't know' response (N=168, 33.1%) (See Table 2) highlighting uncertainty. The second and third most popular political parties were UKIP (N=54, 10.6%) and Plaid Cymru (N=51, 10.0%). This is notable considering the polarised political ideologies of the latter two parties coupled with the shared characteristic of a single-issue focus. The result could be partially explained by the rise of the single-issue party across Western Europe and despite having very different ideologies, both parties are connected with nationalist principles and territory in different ways and to differing degrees. While no election data is available on the party preferences for this age group in 2015, in Wales UKIP received 13.6% of the vote which was 11.2% more than 2010 and Plaid Cymru 12.1%, only 0.8% higher than 2010. This confirms the general increase

in UKIP support across Wales and the UK, reflected in the views of under 18s here, while support for Plaid Cymru remains fairly static, also reflected.

The under 18s in this study show less certainty in their voting preference than 18-24 year olds (see Table 2) and subsequently less support for all other parties, though UKIP support is similar for both groups. In terms of party preference, Labour remains the most popular among both groups, however, the younger age group favour UKIP over Plaid Cymru and the Conservatives, unlike the older age group who favour Plaid Cymru then the Conservatives over UKIP. Importantly the two data sets were collected around two different elections and without the ability to control for election type, variation in age is speculative. The significant implications of these results for social and cultural forms of identification lie in the higher levels of uncertainty, the lower levels of support for Plaid Cymru 'the party of Wales' among the younger age group and higher levels of support for UKIP, a party often associated with British or English nationalism. In terms of political identity there is a markedly less Welsh-orientated stance from our cohort of under 18s compared with 18-24 year olds living in Wales.

TABLE 2 HERE

Survey results depict a group who feel fairly informed, largely through social media. However, in terms of political party representation the high number of 'don't knows' confirm the uncertainty found in other studies of young age groups, specifically under 18s, and calls for further exploration. In addition the lower levels of support for Plaid Cymru among this age group is notable. This is explored through the issues of political concerns, responding to the free text question: *'are you concerned about one particular political issue?'* While this

question is explicitly political in focus, the free text response method allows for links between social and cultural scales, which are seen to occur.

276 of 508 (54.3%) respondents answered the question on political issues of concern and the three most common related to terrorism (N=19, 3.7%), racism (N=16, 3.1%) and animal abuse (N=13, 2.6%). Only 32 (11.6%), responded 'don't know', a much lower number than in the previous survey questions on political knowledge and political parties, showing more certainty in 'politics' when allowed to specify an issue of concern and essentially self-define the meaning of 'political'. In addition a recent multiple choice survey of concerns among under 30s in Wales showed health (53%), immigration (38%) and the economy (34%) to be the highest concerns (Wales Governance Centre 2016) and did not include terrorism, racism or animal abuse. This shows a different set of priorities coming from young people when allowed to define their own issues of political concern. Going further and using Billig's 'meaning of claims to identity' rather than the claim itself, the varying responses reveal a much broader conceptualisation of politics beyond the political and a subsequent variation in interest. For example, multiple choice does not gauge reasons for the concern, so 'immigration' could indicate a concern for the poor treatment of migrants, refugees or asylum seekers or a concern about the numbers entering the UK. The findings from the free text responses overcome this to some extent, seen in the varying detail given along with the concerns, which would have been hidden in multiple-choice answers. Here we give this further consideration.

Those who gave *detailed* concerns, rather than one word answers, cited day to day issues more likely to be affecting themselves, their friends, family, school or close community. These fit the definition of material coherence. More description and explanation was given to tangible issues and less given to issues in the popular media.

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The one particular issue I feel strongly about is people bullying other people about the way they look or the fact that they have special needs.

The one exception was 'terrorism' where detailed answers linked directly with issues in the media, for example:

ISIS! I wish someone would go in a blow the hell out of them and so I feel strongly about it ....this is the one thing in the world I feel fed up about and wish the UK government would do something about it!

However, *rhetorical* responses, mostly one or two word answers, were not often linked with day to day activity (or notions of material coherence), more often with the popular media and can be seen as part of wider networks superseding material coherence and interaction, for example 'immigration', 'terrorism' or 'gun crime'. These tended to link directly to topics in current, popular media at the time the survey was taken (most notably a racially motivated shooting in the USA which happened the week the survey was administered). While respondents linked day to day issues with 'national' issues, for example 'drama department closures' with 'education budget cuts', the issues themselves were articulated in terms of personal or material impact. In the responses politics is indistinguishable from the social and cultural aspects of the day to day.

23 of the 276 (8.6%) issues were directly associated with Wales or being Welsh and all except one were detailed answers. This is notable given the high number of one word answers overall. While the numbers are small those who linked their issues of concern with Wales did so in

detail. Nearly half (10) related to Welsh language either strongly supporting (3), strongly against (3) or neutral (4). The remaining responses were 'lack of high quality sport' and lack of 'sport coverage' in Wales (4), allowing the Welsh flag to remain on driving licences (4), Welsh identity and Welsh nationalism (4) and LGBT rights in Wales (1). The Welsh language is the biggest issue of concern among this sub-group who link politics with Wales making a direct association between perceptions of the political and the cultural in a Welsh context.

The survey results depict a group who are concerned with issues either in the 'national' (UK) media, expressed in one or two words most commonly (imagined coherence), or issues affecting them directly at 'local' scale expressed in sentences and paragraphs giving details, most often the reason for this concern (material coherence). The more detailed answers relate to day to day issues over which young people have some degree of perceived influence or contact. None connect their issues of concern directly with the National Assembly for Wales or the Welsh Government. In terms of the social and cultural implications we see a gap in young people's identification with issues at national (Wales) geographical scale. However, where Wales is mentioned the Welsh language features most highly, an issue likely to be understood through schooling given that half of the schools participating in the study teach through the Welsh medium to some extent and, with the exception of Welsh sport, none of the responses on Welsh language relate to the media revealing an emphasis on culturally located imagined coherences relating to Wales.

There is an element of pragmatism in the responses problematising direct, practical issues in conceptions of 'political'. For example, in the case of drama department cuts, not only did the students feel able to act on their concerns through petitioning, but the issue itself has a direct impact on their day to day activities. None link their issue of concern with a specific level of

government but often link them with their own activities, other social groups or the media. This gives the impression of issues linked to perceived levels of personal control or responsibility for being involved or effecting them, notably excluding democratic practices, namely voting. Issues of connectivity lie within material coherence and even when considering the high use of social media which can transcend geographical boundaries the 'echo chamber' effect is likely to fit with the attachment to 'local' networks of political conceptualisation.

Issues of concern and scales of responsibility

In order to explore the survey results further, 29 focus group respondents were recruited and asked about their political concerns in relation to devolution in Wales, 12 of these were also survey respondents. As outlined above participants were selected with a view to representing those in and out of school, in and out of work, Welsh and non-Welsh speaking and living in affluent, deprived, urban and rural or valleys areas.

Respondents based in the deprived urban area (group 1) had all left school and were seeking employment or working on part-time contracts. Their biggest issue of concern was 'not getting a job', this was based on personal experience and difficulty finding and keeping employment. In terms of responsibility, the issue lay with 'David Cameron' (then PM) and was the 'fault' of economic migration (termed 'immigration'):

> *'It's free money and then they send it back to their country and half of them haven't got kids they build houses over there and make their countries better while ours is getting shitter...stop so many refugees and foreigners that are doing nothing in this country and get them out, keep Britain British basically' (Deprived urban area, respondent 3)*

In terms of responsibility, the group saw the issues as under the control of a UK government and had little to no knowledge of the National Assembly for Wales:

Do you know us as Wales people (respondent 3: Welsh people!) (laughter)… I still don't understand it. I don't know how to put it, you know? England and David Cameron they get more of a say than our Welsh Government? (Deprived urban area, respondent 2)

A secondary issue of concern raised by this group was the lack of practical skills taught in school to prepare young people for the labour market:

'… I left school and I don't know anything I forget what I've learnt. You leave knowing about the 'pyathogram' theorem for maths and I don't know how to do my bills, to do a mortgage, don't know how to prepare myself for a job…we don't know nothing' (Deprived urban area, respondent 1)

But again this issue was in no way connected to devolution or politics at (Welsh) national scale, blame was placed on 'schools', 'immigrants' and responsibility on 'David Cameron'. These issues, not linked with Wales, the Welsh Government or the National Assembly for Wales need to be viewed alongside the high levels of poverty in Wales and specifically the high levels of youth unemployment at 14% (National Assembly for Wales 2016). For many campaigners before 1997 (Andrews, 1999), Welsh devolution was sold as a panacea for Wales's deprivation, a way to be governed by those more familiar with its social, cultural, political and economic makeup and therefore most likely to be effective in tackling problems. With Wales lagging

behind England in terms of youth unemployment the absence of devolution in the narratives on responsibility highlights a deep disjuncture between conceptions of the political and the space that is Wales, and points to low diffuse support and, beyond that, a gap in awareness of the existence of a Welsh Government.

The issues of concern among group 1 are markedly different to those based in the deprived valleys area (group 2). This group was aware but critical of Welsh devolution:

> *As a young person… [and] as a Welsh person too I don't feel represented. If you look at Scotland there is a huge rise in representation in Scotland and England but in Wales...we're just cast aside (Deprived valleys area, respondent 1)*

However, group 2 also saw the protection of Welsh language and culture as the main role of the Welsh Government, and were supportive of this:

> *It's more the culture and how the Welsh language needs to be separated from English, when a government puts legislation through they won't think about how Welsh culture needs to be protected... ...the Welsh language is protected now but that's due to devolution (Deprived valleys area, respondent 5)*

Group 2 stood out for having a strong sense of Welsh identity, an awareness of devolution and critiqued the way in which Wales is currently represented on the political stage:

> *You would think having English votes for English laws would affect Wales but it affects all Britain, I had to read it in my work experience, Wales was mentioned 13 times on*

the 13 pages and about 10 of those was because it said 'England and Wales', we're

counted as England, brushed aside (Deprived valley area, respondent 3)

Welsh-speaking respondents in the affluent urban area (group 3) also made links between different aspects of being 'Welsh' and wanting Wales to be represented politically on a range of issues, many reflecting the survey results (farming and immigration), but also more complex issues not mentioned in the survey responses such as the instrumentalisation of the Welsh language:

'Because the Welsh Government is in charge of education when they come round to

inspect the schools we have to say 'bore da' ('good morning' in Welsh) when they come

into the classroom because otherwise you get marked down conversationally if you

don't speak in Welsh as a school. Which I don't like' (Affluent urban area, respondent

6)

Some in group 3 went further by laying the blame for Welsh specific problems on the Welsh Government:

'One of the things the Welsh government has power over is education and we in Wales

are nearly last in every ranking, that's why I don't like devolution because we obviously

don't know how to make decisions properly. We're not so far away from England but

we're bottom of everything' (Affluent urban area, respondent 3)

However, the phrase *'I don't like devolution'* directly criticises the process not the policies and therefore shows a lack of diffuse support, thus confirming Scully and Jones' findings. In terms

The most notable difference between the three groups is the volume and calibre of discussion around Welsh devolution in relation to issues of concern as well as the issue themselves. For group 1, whose issues of concern centred on employment and (linked to this) economic migration (termed immigration by the group), discussion on devolution was limited to questions around what the 'Welsh Government' is and its role. For group 2 whose issues of concern were focused on central government including 'MP expenses' to 'abolition of the House of Lords', there was slightly more discussion and some critique of devolution focused entirely on Welsh language and culture, separate from their issues of concern stated at the outset of discussion. In terms of placing responsibility, despite their sense of Welsh identity, group 2 saw the UK government as responsible for Welsh political representation and the Welsh Government responsible largely for language and culture. Group 3 discussed the Welsh Government and had knowledge of its role including specific policy areas, such as education, and knowledge of the political parties in Wales. Despite being critical, discussion about the Welsh Government, among those who were predominantly Welsh speakers and still in full time education, was well informed. The deprived valleys (group 2) and affluent urban (group 3) area respondents were all still in full-time education and therefore not facing the difficulties with unemployment seen by those based in the deprived urban area (group 1). This is a significant difference given that the first group's concerns were the tangible problems faced day to day and in line-with the concept of material coherence. Arguably discussion with the first group around scale of responsibility for these issues were reactive and the Welsh Government or

National Assembly for Wales not known. The second group's discussion was more reflective and at regional or national level, in terms of devolution the focus was around Welsh language. The role of the popular media was also apparent in discussion with the second group as MP expenses and abolition of the House of Lords were high on the list of concerns. The third group also had a more reflective discussion on issues at regional and national level, linking more with the definition of imagined coherence. For this group the National Assembly for Wales was well known and responsibility for policy areas and concerns, such as education, attributed to it. Welsh language was a focus and discussions around Welsh-ness and nationality did not emerge as it did with the second group.

The issues of concern differ from those given in the survey (terrorism, racism and animal abuse) and can be condensed into: employment (economic migration), political issues in the popular media, political parties in Wales and, as a secondary concern, the Welsh language and culture. With the exception of the popular media issues from across the UK, all of these issues are related (though not always connected by participants) to the specific socio-political landscape of Wales with high levels of youth unemployment, its own political party system and its own language. When given space to discuss, the young people in this study showed an understanding of politics shaped by the socio-political and cultural concerns that occupying social and cultural geographers studying Wales, but did not always make the connection between this and Wales as a devolved space.

The degrees of awareness and responsibility attributed to the Welsh Government for issues of concern range from minimal awareness and therefore minimal responsibility (group 1), full awareness with responsibility largely attributed to language and culture (group 2) and full awareness with responsibility attributed to range of policy areas (group 3). These results paint

a varied but slightly more positive picture of perceptions of Welsh devolution based on self-reported political concerns and scales of devolved responsibility than previous studies. However, gaps in awareness and support exist and for many the Welsh Government does not feature within their spectrum of political, social of cultural concerns. Also of note is the strong connection between devolution and language and culture in Wales for group 2 showing both a broad conception of 'the political' and a very specific view of the Welsh Government's responsibility.

Concluding discussion

This paper has examined the geographical scales of political, social and cultural identification among young people living in Wales to gauge the geographical levels at which issues of concern and responsibility are located. The survey results show while young people reported feeling relatively informed about politics the high numbers of 'don't knows' in response to political party preference raises questions around perceptions of political representation. This is echoed in the results for the devolved Welsh elections 2016 where only approximately 47% of 18-24 year olds stated they were likely to vote (a drop of 2% since 2011) compared with 49.4% who did not know.

However, detailed issues of concern located in day to day interaction, such as school or farming, were pragmatic rather than expressing dissatisfaction with governing forces, implying low alienation as found in Fox's study of Millennials (2015). The responses show a link between detailed answers and the concept of material coherence, and rhetorical, one word answers and the concept of imagined coherence. Those with more tangible concerns did not use the language of the popular media to describe their political issue but described it in detail.

Here we see the value in allowing young people to define 'political' issues in their own words. The findings tell us where young people make most effort to express their views, the vast majority of issues are based on a material coherence and also largely tangible and possible to influence or be involved in. In addition by allowing young people to express political concerns in their own words we see a very broad and varied conceptualisation and an understanding of 'politics' which is difficult to separate from wider social and cultural influences.

Reference to Welsh-specific issues focused on language in the survey, however, the focus group findings imply that socially and culturally located issues of concern relating to Wales increase and broaden with knowledge of the National Assembly for Wales. Concern around (youth) unemployment, which is high in Wales, was separated from governance in Wales and responsibility attributed to UK central government. Focus group findings also show a clear distinction between political concerns and scales of governance, most notably between those based in the deprived urban area who had left school, and those based in the affluent urban and deprived valleys areas, still in school. The issue of unemployment is clearly linked with the group member's personal situations. This perhaps highlights a methodological limitation in the absence of school-leavers in the surveys, and a need to carry out further survey-based research with groups who have left school for comparison.

For those living in deprived areas, the issues facing them personally (material coherence) were their main concern. Again, as with the survey results these tangible issues were articulated in detail based on personal experiences of job applications, zero hour contracts and not being ready for the world of work, rather than the more rhetorical terminology used to describe the issues such as 'labour market changes' and 'unemployment', for example. Among the respondents in the two other groups still attending school, issues of concern were at regional

(or national) level and expressed as imagined coherence, such as education, language and farming. These were not discussed in detail by the majority of the group but put forward in one or two words as rhetorical contributions. This repeats the pattern seen in the survey where political issues drawn from material coherence receive more detail, description and attention while those at national level are expressed rhetorically. Welsh language and culture was the centre of detailed discussion on devolution in the second group and seen as the main role of the Welsh Government and National Assembly for Wales while the third group attributed responsibility for a range of concerns to the Welsh Government and National Assembly for Wales. This reveals a closer interface between state and society on the issues concerning social geographers, devolved language and culture.

In terms of what these issues of concern based on material or imagined coherence mean to claims of identity, the closer interface between state and society in Wales seems to exists for young people largely in terms of language and culture where devolution is concerned, with some exceptions. Diffuse, or deeply rooted, support was not strong in the data. Not only does this consolidate Scully and Jones' (2015) findings on low levels of diffuse support for the National Assembly for Wales, but in relation to young people, it also increases the possibility that the 'politics of hope' (Hopkins 2015a) only applies to Scottish devolution.

In response to Paasi's (2013) work and Billig's (1995) call to scrutinise claims of territorial identity, the tangible day to day (material) are less well connected with perceptions of devolution in this research than issues in the popular media at national and supra-national level (imagined). By using this approach the paper adds to discussion and knowledge on young people and political geography, highlighting the complexity and diversity within different groups of young people, the ways political concerns are expressed and linked (or not) to scales

of governance and wider, often specifically Welsh, social and cultural influences on the day to day.

Finally, it is important to consider the political events to which participants were exposed following this study, namely the devolved Welsh election (May 2016) and the UK referendum on EU membership (June 2016). While it is difficult to make assertions, the 18-24 year olds who intended to vote in the 2016 devolved Welsh elections showed more certainty in voting preference than the 14-17 year olds in this study in the run-up to the 2015 general election. Without being able to control for election type or age within these two sets of data, it is possible to speculate that either young people who did vote in May 2016 felt strongly about their choice or that the certainty increased with age. Either way the finding from a similar survey based around the devolved Welsh elections may have yielded very different results.

In addition when considering Wales' majority vote to leave the EU despite all National Assembly political parties, aside from UKIP, campaigning to remain, the influence of devolved political rhetoric on public opinion in Wales appears minimal. Coupled with this was the high number of young people in Wales who voted to remain in the EU, a UK trend, highlighting a consensus between a majority of young people in Wales and the National Assembly. It is also worth considering the National Assembly's recent announcement to campaign for a Youth Assembly in Wales with a cross-party consensus and the high likelihood of the Welsh Government extending the voting franchise to 16 and 17 year olds following the enactment of the Wales Bill. It is very possible given this tumultuous political context, with an emphasis on devolution and the fact that many of the young people who took part in this study would have been eligible to vote on the 5th May and 23rd June 2016, that scales of political concerns and responsibility may be very different in a future study of this type. However, the findings

presented here tentatively point to a generation with widely varied subjective understandings of devolution giving further credence to Mills and Ducket's (2016: 2) call to include devolution within studies of youth geography under the claim that youth political engagement is increasingly shaped by the geographies of devolution.

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