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## Deliberative discussions as a research method: A qualitative and mixed methods approach to exploring young Europeans' identities and values\*\*

### Summary

This article examines the use of deliberative discussions as a method of analysing the geo-political affiliations and values of young people. Exploring such areas through traditional interviews and questionnaires can present problems in that they can unduly prompt answers. Using open-ended and loosely structured discussions can allow the generation of ideas and views in the particular vocabulary and context of participants using non-directive open-ended questions. The qualitative data generated by such an approach can be very unstructured, but has the value of being generated by participants without using stimuli that sometimes induce responses that are unreliable. This article focuses on the principles of conducting and managing discussion processes to maximise the potential usefulness of the data. Two investigations are outlined. The first uses data from deliberative discussions in a qualitative study of how young Europeans (aged between 10 and 20) variously describe themselves as members of a state/states, and/or of Europe, a particular locality or as global. The second study uses the same data, but in a mixed methods approach that included a quantitative analysis of the young people's use of values in explaining and illustrating particular affiliations. Deliberative discussion as a process is analysed and defined in some practical detail, with suggestions as to procedures that may elicit the most useful detail using the participants own 'natural' language.

**Keywords:** deliberative discussion; young people; geo-political affiliation; values; Europe

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## The background

This article describes how a particular method – deliberative discussion – can be used in researching beliefs, principles and values; how data generated from this might be used in both qualitative and mixed methods research approaches, and the potential advantages of this method over other methods. Deliberative discussions appear particularly suited for working with young people, still ‘in education’, but the method could also be useful with older groups of people.

The questions I sought to address in my study was how do young people – defined as within the 10 to 20 years of age bracket – identify themselves with particular geo-political units, such as a city, a province, a state or nation, or perhaps of a group of states, such as Europe, or more broadly as global citizens. In contemporary European society, young people (and others) elect to define themselves with different entities in particular social contexts: these entities are thus self-evidently socially constructed. Why, and how, are such identifications constructed and used?

Social constructionism holds that such concepts, beliefs and values are themselves the outcomes of dynamic processes of social interaction with others (Berger & Luckman, 1966). The problem I sought to address was that attempts to elicit from an individual how they variously used these concepts inevitably involved a social interaction between the researcher and the researched – the outcome thus becomes ‘artificial’, in the sense that is co-constructed in the interaction of investigation. Pierre Bourdieu (1973) explained this concisely when he asserted that public opinion did not exist: “public opinion is an *artefact*, pure and simple, whose function is to conceal the fact that the state of opinion at any given moment is a system of forces and tensions” (p. 223). In opinion polling, “the questions asked showed that the great majority of them were directly related to the political concerns of the «political staff»” [“*étaient directement liées aux préoccupations politiques du «personnel politique»*”] (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 223).

An example of this can be seen in the efforts of Eurobarometer, the European Commission’s opinion monitoring exercise, to report on public engagement with European values. In 2013, representative samples in all EU member states (and accession states) were asked in a survey (Eurobarometer 79.3) QD9: “In the following list, which are the three most important values for you personally?”, and were presented with a list of twelve items (such as the rule of law, equality, respect for other cultures, democracy, solidarity, etc.). This appeared to be a partial selection from the values listed in the European Union’s *Treaty on European Union* (EU, 2012) and the Council of Europe’s *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (ECHR, 1950). The presumption is that respondents

would know all these values, and be able to partially order them in terms of personal importance, which might present some difficulties (such as values not listed, considering more than three values to be essential, embarrassment and not knowing about/having considered some items, etc.). They were then asked QD10: “Which three of the following values best represent the EU?” (which makes the same demands as above, and assumes some knowledge about EU policies, and implies that some different values might/should be more representative of the EU). Figure 1 shows the aggregate responses, sorted into four age categories, including ‘young people’ (15–25; data were not collected from younger people). The presentation

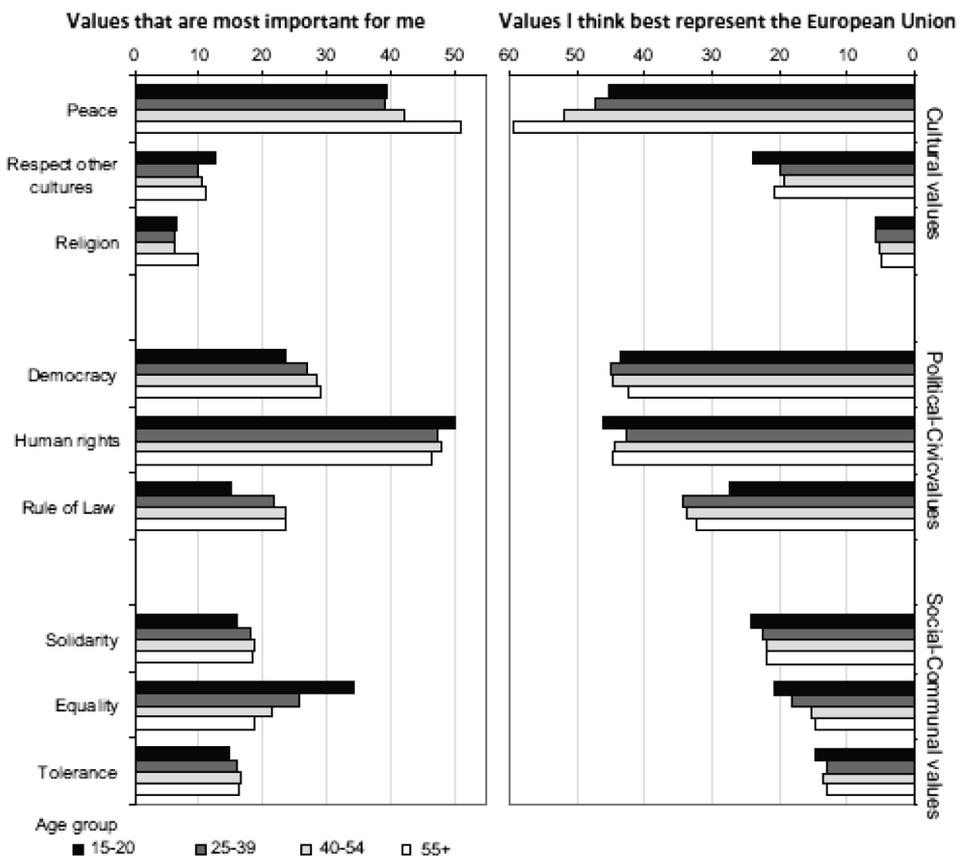


Figure 1. Responses to the Eurobarometer survey, May 2013, on personal and European Values. QD9: “In the following list, which are the three most important values for you personally?”; QD10: “Which three of the following values best represent the EU?” Eurobarometer response, 2013; responses to selected values grouped by age of respondents.

Source: European Commission (2017). Eurobarometer 79.3, 2013; TNS opinion, Brussels [producer]. Extracted from the GESIS Datenarchiv, Köln. ZA5689 Datenfile Version 2.0.0, taken from Ross (2019, p. 53).

of pre-determined categories, the varying contingencies of time and place, the assumption that they are seen as having different levels of importance, and that personal values may differ from EU values all place demands that will vary from individual to individual respondents that suggest that the findings are of limited value in understanding what populations think these values 'mean'.

Asking questions has a particular complication when working with young people who are in school or college: they often anticipate questions used by teachers (and other adults) to be used to test or assess their knowledge (Alexander, 2008; Hogden & Webb, 2008). There is therefore an expectation that a question should have a 'correct' answer, that they are expected to give, and may feel obliged to find a 'right' response.

Young people have also been characterised as uninterested in politics, and as sceptics of democracy: some studies suggest that a weakening of civic life and falling voter turnout are particularly seen among younger people (Franklin, 2004; Putnam 2000; van Biezen et al., 2012). Pippa Norris observed that "young people are believed to be particularly disillusioned about the major institutions of representative democracy, leaving them apathetic (at best) or alienated (at worst)" (cited in Sloam, 2014, p. 664). Some scholars have suggested that this lack of commitment to liberal democratic values endangers democracies and will result in instability and "democratic deconsolidation" (Foa & Mounk, 2016, p. 16), particularly in areas of Europe where young people face social discrimination, 'apathy has become active antipathy'. An Open Society Foundation study of global attitudes towards democracy concluded "there was less enthusiasm among 18-to-35-year-olds for democracy, with 57 percent preferring it to other forms of government, for those aged 56 and above, the figure was 71 percent" (Peiris & Samarasinghe, 2023, p. 7), and similar proportional differences supporting army rule and strong leadership. But Eva Fernández et al. (2023) suggest that "concerns about young citizens lacking support for or even being opposed to liberal democracy's institutions, values and system functioning must be tempered" (p. 4). Ronald Inglehart (2016) argues that discourses of 'democratic deconsolidation' are overstated: young people feel insecure, rather than rejecting liberal democracy. Norris (2017) suggests young people are sceptical and critical of democracy, rather than oppositional. Young people are generally more satisfied with democracy than older people, and studies point to 'do it ourselves' political behaviours (Pickard, 2019; Pontes et al., 2019). These forms of engagement go beyond the limits of the classic exposition of political culture, made by Almond and Verba (1965), which proposed an essentially passive culture, in which most citizens vote and accept existing political systems and structures, and a few are more actively involved in political roles (Ross, 2018).

Around the world, recent mass mobilisations have brought to the fore groups of young people critical of current political offers and who seek to participate in democratic life in ways that liberal democracies struggle to meet. Cammaerts et al. (2014) describe “a strong desire among many young Europeans to participate in democratic life, but this desire is not met by existing democratic institutions and discourses” (p. 645). Instances of this include the Occupy mobilisations against the excesses of global capitalism, Black Lives Matter, Friday Strikes for Climate Change and Just Stop Oil.

Resistance to discussing politics with young people is sometimes associated with a denial that they can understand sophisticated political concepts (described by Maitles, 1997). Manning (2010) points to the “discourse of youth apathy typically draws upon quantitative methodologies and orthodox hegemonic notions of politics” (p. 2). Henn et al. (2002) call this “conventional political science” (p. 170) and argue that including wider forms of political participation in studies of young people’s participation would show much greater evidence of activity among young people, and higher levels of youth political participation (Henn et al., 2003). Hahn (1998) concluded that students report that when they (a) frequently discuss controversial issues in their classes, (b) perceive that several sides of issues are presented, and (c) feel comfortable in expressing their views “they are more likely to develop attitudes that have the potential to foster later civic participation” (p. 233). Kudrnáč (2022) points out that the teacher’s role is vital as it is “the teacher that decides if and how often discussions take place that he or she consequently moderates...sets up the topic ... [and determines] how much time these discussions take from school hours” (p. 224).

This emphasis on the significance of how classroom discussion can support the understandings of the political is an important contribution to the research method of deliberative discussion. If a researcher can create a young person led discussion, in which the language and vocabulary are those of the young people themselves, it can be possible to listen to the development and use of ideas, concepts and beliefs in their own discourse, rather than that of the researcher. It is to this methodology that we now turn.

### **Deliberate discussion as a methodology**

The term deliberative discussion is precisely formulated. It is a discussion, not a debate: there are no decisions or victories at the conclusion. It is deliberative, in the sense that ideas and examples put forward are listened to by the group, and are challenged by any who disagree. It is also the discourse of a group, known to