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Beyond lifestyle politics in a time of crisis?: comparing young peoples' issue agendas and views on inequality

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary research on young people and politics portrays their political engagement as: individualised not collectivist; issue-driven not ideology-driven and postmaterialist instead of materialist. This shift towards 'lifestyle politics' is assumed to be universal among young people, rather than shaped by traditional social cleavages and structures. This paper investigates these assumptions and asks whether young people's experience of national economic austerity and increasing material inequality shapes the everyday political issues they identify with, and how they understand inequality and the distribution of resources in their societies. The analysis is based on responses to an open-ended question on key political issues of importance, in surveys of representative samples of 1200 young people aged 16–29 in 3 countries: Australia, the UK and the USA. Afterwards, we conducted online discussion groups with 107 young people, in which they were asked to discuss changes in the nature of equality in their societies. The findings show that there is a complex interdependence between individualised, everyday understandings of economic change *and* an identity-based politics of equal rights. However, there are nuanced differences in understanding inequality, dependent on young people's national location and socioeconomic background. The implications these findings have for young people's future political engagement are discussed.

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Introduction

Talking about inequality, especially that based on income and resources, has become reinvigorated in recent political discourse. The financial crisis of 2008 changed real circumstances for many young people in advanced democracies, making everyday life much more precarious. New social movements emerged that focused on growing inequality, such as Indignados in Spain and the Occupy movement in the USA. In early 2014 a dense economic text *Capital*, written by a French economist Thomas Piketty, revealed the international and historical trajectories of growing inequality. The book has been a bestseller. This paper demonstrates that young people are concerned about everyday material issues in their lives, from the economy at large, to access to healthcare, work, education and welfare. However, it also shows that there are stark differences among

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young people in how they discursively understand changing economic circumstances and growing inequality, and to whom they attribute the responsibility for its redress. These differences are shaped by the prominence of identity politics and the increasing individualisation of political engagement for younger generations; as well as young people's diverse everyday lived-experiences.

Contemporary literature on young people's political engagement assumes that, beyond political interest and partisanship, it is human rights, the environment and identity issues that motivate and mobilise young people into political participation (Bang 2005; Bennett 2012). These issues fall into the domain of lifestyle politics and can also be ascribed as post or non-material issues. However, there has been very little recent investigation into how material issues may also shape young people's political engagement, beyond the finding that it is the most educated and privileged young people who participate in politics at all (Henn and Foard 2013; Sloam 2012). Lifestyle politics analyses obscure ongoing material-based motivations for political engagement, yet they also force us to understand how individualisation processes shape the construction of issues in an everyday sense for young people.

Young people's understandings of issues reflect political discourse and the shift towards the individualisation of everyday social problems, away from traditional notions of collectivism and state responsibility (Harris, Wyn, and Younes 2010). Neoliberal ideals that both demonise those dependent on welfare and the unemployed and praise individual achievements and self-sufficiency are still strong, even in an era where it is acknowledged that inequality is rising and young people are at the forefront, experiencing new forms of disadvantage. But, context likely also matters. The effect of the global financial crisis (GFC) has not been experienced by all young people, in all advanced democracies. We look closely at Australia, the UK and the USA to see whether there is a different everyday experience, political discourse and understanding.

This article, first, critically engages with literature on life(style) politics and political engagement to see how inequality is understood. Second, we demonstrate the variability in recent socioeconomic experiences of young people in the three countries, showing that Australian youth were the least and UK youth the most effected by the GFC. The article then briefly presents original survey data on the everyday issues young people nominate as being of political importance to them; this is followed by in-depth analysis of qualitative data on how young people understand equality and economic disadvantage. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications this research has for fostering political engagement and mobilisation that takes into account the realities of young people's diverse lived-experiences. We argue that, if we focus more on contrasting issue agendas and differing lived-experiences among young people we necessarily need to change our normative expectations of how they do or can engage in politics.

Politics in the shadow of postmaterialism and lifestyle politics

Postmaterialist analyses chart macro-structural shifts in democratic societies, such as increased levels of education and wealth, and link these with changes in social and political values and actions, including noting the alternative character and specific historical, generational, origin of new values. They highlight societal shifts toward valuing non-material goods, such as the natural environment, public interest and debate, freedom of speech and

a more humane society. Inglehart (1997) argued that postmaterialist goals were best represented by the movements that emerged in the late-1960s and early-1970s, and attempted to create major change in liberal-democratic societies, such as the anti-war, environment, women, and gay and lesbian movements.

Norris (2002) identified the emergence of a 'politics of choice' and, influenced by Inglehart's (1997) analysis of postmaterialist values and movements, engaged implicitly with broader concerns in social and political theory that seek to explain changes in political engagement and the influence of neoliberal rationalities. Earlier, Giddens had developed an influential premise that sought to understand the shift from the emancipatory movements of both old left (e.g. labour movement) and new left (e.g. feminist), to a new kind of 'life politics':

> Life politics does not primarily concern the conditions which liberate us in order to make choices: it is a politics *of* choice. While emancipatory politics is a politics of life chances, life politics is a politics of lifestyle. … life politics concerns political issues which flow from processes of self actualisation in post-traditional contexts, where globalising influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self realisation influence global strategies. (1991, 214)

Giddens did not totally abandon the concept of inequality, but tried to broaden it from its traditional material base. Instead, new class struggles are over the capacity to *have* self-actualisation – a politics of choice – as part of a citizen's lived-experience:

> access to means of self actualisation becomes itself one of the dominant forces of class division and the distribution of inequalities more generally. … the emancipatory struggles which have helped moderate the polarising effects of 'unfettered' capitalist markets are hence directly relevant to the pursuit of life-political endeavours. (1991, 228)

In contemporary research, analysis of, and arguments for, life or lifestyle politics have been particularly taken up by Bennett (1998, 2012) and those writing on political consumerism, which includes: everyday acts of boycotting and buycotting products for a political or ethical concern (Stolle, Micheletti, and Hooghe 2005; Copeland 2014); everyday environmental politics (Connolly and Prothero 2008) and political debates on the quality of life and death, such as euthanasia and abortion. Bennett and others have also suggested that self-actualisation has become a norm of political citizenship that either replaces or competes with traditional, dutiful ideas of citizenship (see Bang 2005; Bennett, Wells, and Freelon 2011).

These studies generally do not look at how the new 'politics of choice' is underpinned by inequality of access, meaning that not all citizens are able to, or are interested in, engaging in these forms of individualised, self-actualisation, as many are still shaped or constrained by their everyday material circumstances. What is important in understanding the post-GFC lived-experience of young people is that there is unlikely to be a return to traditional forms of materialist politics involving class conflict and labour movements. Correspondingly, Rheingans and Hollands (2013, 560) argue that 'dominant theoretical thinking about young people and politics over-emphasises the importance of individualism and "lifestyle politics"'. They found that new student movements in the UK produced a 'collective reflexivity', with 'the merging of so-called "materialist" and "postmaterialist" political values' locating their struggle for self-actualisation within a broader critique of capitalism, public sector cuts and the banking crisis (2013, 560). Others agree that the

new wave of global justice social movements that emerged after the GFC, such as the UK student movement, Indignados in Spain and Occupy predominantly in the USA, brought together both economic-material and postmaterial, identity and lifestyle-oriented concerns (Langman 2013; Jensen and Bang 2013). For example, Glasius and Pleyers (2013) identify three core values of these movements, democracy, social justice and dignity, and argue that, as social justice and the defence of cultural differences were both core to mobilisation, movement grievances were underpinned by claims for both redistribution of resources *and* recognition of particular identities and lived-experiences.

Yet, it is deeper reflection on everyday lived-experience that helps us to understand ordinary young people's political engagement and their attitudes to macro-structural forces, such as economic inequality and opportunities. Wood (2012) found that young people's perceptions of 'important' issues were shaped by their lived-experiences in everyday, social–spatial interactions within communities and schools. She later argued that conceptualising the everyday in analysing young people's citizenship enables a 'politicisation of new matters, actors and places' (Wood, 2015). Everyday lived-experience is also emphasised in critical youth political engagement scholarship by Marsh, O'Toole, and Jones (2007), who, following Bourdieu, emphasise that individuals' political experiences are shaped by their access to economic, social and cultural resources. Thus, young people have agency in their political engagement, but it is not unfettered by traditional structures of class, gender and race. In Marsh, O'Toole, and Jones (2007, 134) research project they did not ask young people directly about how they experienced class or inequality. Instead they interpreted whether young people spoke in the *language* of class, and reflected on the extent to which their access to economic, cultural and social capital shaped their lives and their political understanding (see also Odegård and Berglund 2008). In this paper we take on board these analyses of everyday (structured) lived-experience to understand how economic change is processed by young people and affects their understanding of both important issues, and their explanations of social and economic change and inequality.

This brings us back to a discussion of how structured lived-experience post-GFC interacts with individual life projects of agency and self-actualisation for politics, introduced by Giddens, and taken up by Bennett (1998) and Bang (2005). Many writing on the sociology of youth now accept that life course transitions have changed over the last 20 years. There are generation specific tendencies whereby young people's lives are less stable, their pathways into work, family and so on, are much more individualised – often described, following Ulrich Beck, as a 'choice biography' (see Threadgold 2011; Woodman 2013). Seminal research by Wyn and Woodman (2006) analysed young people's attitudes and perspectives to these social changes, moving beyond dominant behavioural analyses. They identified three salient aspects in young people's subjective experiences: responsibility and choice, personal relationships and finding a balance in life. It is this acceptance by young people of *personal* responsibility to create an individualised life pathway that is of particular interest to this paper. Changing subjectivities of young people clearly matter, as they reflect and shape social and political change in society. Looking through this generational context lens also challenges age-based generalisations that obscure the differences and increasing inequality among young people (Wyn and Woodman 2006, 507, 511).

Recently Standing (2011) has argued that there is a growing class, the precariat, mainly composed of young people in irregular work that normalises insecure, individualised pathways. Establishing economic security is arguably a barrier to engaging in politics; and

Harris, Wyn, and Younes (2010, 12) suggest that a lack of security also leads to scepticism about the state that neither protects or listens to young people, and actively constructs them as apathetic or inadequate citizens (see also Henn and Foard 2013, 375). It is this contradiction between young people who have agency in their self-actualisation, and those whose structured everyday lived-experience constrains their political expression and engagement that helps us to think beyond lifestyle politics in the post-GFC age. Or, as Threadgold (2011, 388) labels it, when young people cannot put their life-choices into economic or political action it forces them towards a *reflexive experience of inequality*.

One of the motivations for this research project was to compare similarities and differences in contemporary young people's lived-experiences in three countries. Table 1 shows that around 40% of the under-65 population now have a tertiary education in all three countries, with a larger proportion among younger cohorts in Australia. However, there appears a strong education divide, with a quarter of those aged between 25 and 64 in Australia and the UK not completing formal schooling, compared to only 11% of Americans. Youth unemployment is highest in the UK at 22%; nearly three times the overall unemployment rate in the UK. While the rate of youth unemployment is nearly double the overall unemployment rate in Australia and the USA as well, the most important indicator is the 10-year decline in overall employment of young people in both the UK and USA that demonstrates the effect of the 2008 GFC in those countries. Young people in Australia were comparatively unscathed by the crisis.

Less than half of young people in the UK and USA voted in the last national level election, significantly less than general turnout of about two-thirds of the population. Whereas Australia is buffered by compulsory voting and high turnout, it was nevertheless estimated that about 25% of young people aged 18–24 did not register to vote in time to participate in the 2013 election (ABC 2013). From this brief snapshot we can see that young people in Australia are most likely to attend university, engage in elections and to be in employment; but, despite this, there is a sizable group of young people who do not finish school and a growing rate of youth unemployment. In the USA educational attainment for university and school completions are comparatively high, yet the sheer numbers of unemployed young people at 3.5 million and decline of the rate of employment, with low youth electoral engagement are cause for concern. Youth in the UK seem to have been the worst hit by the GFC, with concomitant very high youth unemployment, sizable decline in employment rates, a large group who did not complete school, and a minority of young people engaged with electoral politics.

Table 1. Snapshot of young people in three countries: education, employment and voting turnout.

	Australia	UK	USA
Tertiary education attainment population 25–34	44%	38%	42%
Tertiary education attainment population 25–64 (2010)	38%	46%	42%
Not completed school population 25–64	27%	25%	11%
Youth unemployment (2012)	12%	22%	16%
Number of unemployed youth	249,000	994,000	3,474,000
Employment rate change 2000–2011, 15–24 year olds	−1.50%	−11.40%	−14.20%
Total unemployment rates (2011)	5%	8%	9%
Youth voter turnout (UK = 18–24, USA = 18–29)		44%	45%
Voter turnout, all ages (last election: 2013, 2010, 2012)	93%	66%	68%

Sources: OECD (2013); voter turnout all ages, IDEA; IPSOS (2010) and CIRCLE (2013).

Yet, what we do not sufficiently understand is how young people themselves understand growing inequality and social change in their societies. It is likely that, in circumstances where young people have more security in their working pathways, and agency in everyday life course decisions, they may still ascribe to postmaterialist type values and issues. But, it is not clear if the converse is also true; whether increasing insecurity leads to a more nuanced understanding of material circumstances and growing inequality. Consequently, the three research questions underpinning the remainder of the paper are:

(1) Are young people more concerned about materialist issues, such as inequality, over postmaterial, lifestyle politics-type issues? Does this differ across countries?
(2) How do young people understand and explain notions of inequality in their everyday lives?
(3) What implications do these findings have for understanding young people's political engagement?

Methods

The analysis is based on two related data sources. First, we commissioned a survey from IPSOS-Mori conducted in April–May 2013 using their online panels of young people aged 16–29 in Australia, the UK and the USA (final sample: Australia = 1222; UK = 1241; USA = 1228). The questionnaire was designed by the chief investigators on this project and took respondents approximately 20 minutes. We took a novel approach to asking young people about the political and social issues they believed to be important. We used one open-ended question, the second one in our questionnaire, in order to elicit top of mind responses not be shaped by other questionnaire content. Survey participants were given space to name up to three issues and most chose to do so. By using an open-ended question, rather than a list of pre-determined issues, we were able to ensure we covered the broad scope of issues important to young people. It also reduced the possibility of prompting a socially acceptable response.

Based on hand-coding of the open-ended responses to the question: 'Using the space provided, please list up to three political or social issues you think must be addressed in the next 5 years', Table 2 lists the proportion of individuals nominating an issue category. A category needed to attract at least 4–5% of responses in at least one country to remain a separate category. The 'other' category includes items that could not be coded into the existing categories (see Appendix 1).

Second, we conducted 12 online discussion groups (4 per country) with survey sample subsets over 3 days in September 2013 via IPSOS-Mori facilitated discussion boards. There were 107 participants (approximately 9 per group), who were aged 16–21 years (median age = 19), with 56% female. Using the survey data, participants were recruited into four kinds of groups based on two variables:

- Amount of individualised political participation: where 0–3 was considered a low number of acts vs. 7–13 as a high number of political acts.
- Socioeconomic status: based on parents education where both had higher education as high socio-economic status (SES) or neither parent had higher education as low SES.

Our participants are identified in the subsequent analysis as coming from one of the four group types, labelled as HP/HSES, HP/LSES, LP/HSES, LP/LSES; as well as their country of origin and their sex. The discussion consisted of 17 original, open-ended, thematic

Table 2. Issues by country: % of individuals that nominated issue.

	Australia		USA		UK	
	$n = 1190$, total = 3112		$n = 1150$, total = 3076		$n = 1151$, total = 3102	
1	Education	27%	Economy	58%	Economy	47%
2	Immigration	27%	Health	28%	Immigration	35%
3	Environment and climate	26%	Same-sex marriage	23%	Work	31%
4	Health	25%	Work	19%	Benefits and welfare	29%
5	Economy	23%	International issues	19%	Health	19%
6	Work	20%	Education	17%	Education	17%
7	Infrastructure	14%	Other social issues	15%	Other social issues	12%
8	Same-sex marriage	13%	Immigration	13%	Other	11%
9	Other	12%	Environment and climate	12%	Housing	11%
10	Other public services	12%	Other public services	12%	Environment and climate	8%
11	Cost of living	12%	Gun control	11%	Other public services	8%
12	Pol system problems	11%	Other	10%	Cost of living	8%
13	Other social issues	10%	Reproductive issues	9%	Crime and safety	8%
14	Carbon tax	8%	Pol system problems	8%	International issues	6%
15	Crime and safety	6%	Cost of living	5%	Pol system problems	6%
16	Housing	5%	Discrimination	5%	European union	5%
17	International issues	5%	Infrastructure	3%	Same-sex marriage	2%
18	Discrimination	5%	Crime and safety	2%	Discrimination	2%
19					Infrastructure	2%

Note: See Appendix 1 for notes on categories.

questions designed by the chief investigators. The analysis for this paper uses two questions on socioeconomic inequality:

(1) When you think about the term 'equality', what sorts of things come to mind? (Please list or comment on as many ideas as you want.) Do you think Australia/UK/USA has more or less 'equality' in recent years? Why? Can you think of examples that show this?

(2) The cartoon contrasted two families, one poor and one rich, suggesting strongly that wealth and well-being are inherited, not worked for. What does it mean to you? What is it saying about society? Do you agree or disagree? Why/why not? What implications does this have for young people today?

The coding process focused on each question that was asked of all 107 participants in the online asynchronous group discussion. The data are akin to responses to open-ended questions, with some interaction among the group participants like synchronous, offline focus groups, but was dependent on the question asked. The two inequality questions had limited interaction between group participants, yet amounted to about 100,000 words of response text by our participants. In the qualitative analysis we first applied the broad theoretical concepts to identify material and postmaterialist type responses, then using a grounded theory approach, identified the mid-level thematic responses within these concepts, in order to identify differences based on country, group type and gender.

Issue analysis

Table 2 shows great variation between the three countries in the dispersion of named issues, and the top ranked issues. Notably, a majority of young people in the USA, and nearly half in the UK, ranked the economy as an issue of concern for them. In Australia, where young people were less affected by the GFC, the economy was the fifth highest issue, and the first five issues all cluster together, with a quarter of respondents nominating

them, but no single issue is dominant. Instead, concern is raised more or less equally about issues of education, immigration, climate change, and health, and then the economy.

With the exception of education, most of the highly ranked issues cannot be labelled as stereotypically the domain of young people who are only concerned about life or postmaterial politics. This suggests that young people's political concerns vary and are similar to those of older people in general; it is just that issues such as work and education feature highly as they are more immediate in the everyday lives of young people (for similar findings, see Furlong and Cartmel 2011, 24); and, due to the GFC, access to both is becoming more constrained for less-advantaged young people (see Standing 2011).

Three other issues are worth contrasting across the three countries. First, in Australia immigration ranks as equal first and second in the UK, with just over 1/4 and just over 1/3 concerned, respectively. All three countries are advanced democracies and multicultural, with a relatively high intake of immigrants historically. In all three countries in recent years there has been an increasing level of political debate about immigration and/or the acceptance of refugees. Interpreting these answers to the open-ended question is limited because we do not know whether they were positive or negative about immigration. While mentions of racism were coded into the 'discrimination' category, these responses only indicate the salience of immigration within public debate and to young people themselves.

Second, the issue of environment and climate change, an oft-mentioned postmaterial concern, is the easiest issue to compare with concerns about the economy. Young Australians were twice as likely as young Americans, and three times as likely as young Britons, to name the environment and climate change as a concern to them. While these issues have had high salience in public opinion and the Australian political landscape for about 30 years, government responses have been both complex and contested (Leviston and Walker 2010). Furthermore, the Australian Labor Party (2007–2013) government's 'carbon tax' was nominated directly by 8% of young Australians, and thus was labelled separately as its own issue category.

Third, the issue of same-sex marriage was the eighth highest ranked issue in Australia, with 13%; the lowest ranked issue in the UK, at 2% and, surprisingly, the third highest named issue in the USA with 23%, after the economy and health. These differences in the salience of this lifestyle politics issue could partly reflect differing policy positions and high profile political debate within the three countries. Same-sex marriage legislation was passed in England in July 2013 (just after the survey was in the field) with broad cross-party political support. In the USA, marriage is governed by state law and there has been extensive, polarising, debate, with some states creating new laws to more strongly prohibit same-sex marriage while 17 of the 50 states have legalised same-sex marriage in the last two years. Again, while this issue has high salience among American youth, there are likely to be individuals with both positive and negative concerns. In Australia same-sex marriage is illegal, with bipartisan support for it to remain so, despite a high salience and a majority of public support for its implementation (Johnson 2013).

Online focus group analysis

In light of these mixed findings on the importance of material issues such as the economy, we use our focus group transcripts to explore how young people perceive equality and

inequality in their own society, and also who they held responsible for the differences in lived-experience between rich and poor. As such, we are interested in how individualisation, choice biographies and life politics may coexist with experiences of increasing inequality within society.

Understanding equality

The initial coding of our online discussion group data was for postmaterial and material responses, to see if both were present in young people's understanding of equality. It was clear that some participants interpreted notions of equality in society in purely materialist or economic terms, in effect using understandings of both equal opportunities and equal outcomes. Coding for postmaterial responses were based on discussions of rights; with a focus on mainly identity-based forms of equality, especially gender and same-sex relationships. Overall, there were over twice as many postmaterial responses as materialist ones. We observed differences between participants across the three countries in terms of these kinds of discursive understandings of equality.

The materialist responses were scrutinised and a new set of sub-codes emerged from the data, including: work/employment; class; education; benefits; and general explanations of the need for equal opportunities for all, despite socioeconomic backgrounds, vs. intervention to create equal outcomes. These categorisations are not always distinct and many responses were given more than one code. Materialist answers were most likely to come from UK participants. Some also talked about gender or race in materialist terms; for example, arguments were proffered that systemic equality had gone too far as immigrants and/or women were taking away work opportunities. This response, generally given by disadvantaged young men, was very rare.

The two quotes below demonstrate that materialist interpretations of equality focus on levelling the starting point to create equality opportunities for people to excel, dependent on their *individualised* skills and talents. The exemplar quotes below provide a contrast between differing engagement and background of the respondents in the way they interpret the distribution of equal opportunities. For the privileged young woman, it is about society's judgement and obligation to provide for equal opportunity, while the disadvantaged young man talks more concretely about how money and access to digital technology underpin equality:

> Equality to me means equal opportunity for everyone no matter where they are from or what they do. Nobody should be judged by any other thing than their own talents and skills. (Female, Australia, HP/HSES)

> Personally I think equality I think about opportunity. I think that all people should be given the same opportunities in life so that some do not start in a worse position than others. Sometimes this notion of opportunity can be tied with finances, such as a student of wealth having access to a computer at home while a student that comes from poverty doesn't. In situations like this equality would mean offering help to those who may need it. (Male, USA, LP/LSES)

Less frequent were materialist responses that explicitly discussed concepts of class and/or growing economic inequality. One exceptional example is provided by a politically engaged young woman, who refers to growing social and economic divide in the UK, as well as an increase in radical political responses, through protests, strikes and riots:

> There seems to be a greater divide between the classes, with the wealthy staying wealthy, but the people who are less well-off seem to be struggling more and more. People are now more likely to do something about feeling less equal now though, in order to try and change the situation, e.g., the student riots, teacher strikes. (Female, UK, HP/LSES)

Describing equality in terms of materialist, equal outcomes was a nuanced category. Several respondents complained about the constraints of an idealised society based on equal outcomes, while others put forward quite simple statements, such as: 'Free will and adequate basic needs are supplied. Pretty much everyone at the same level. No classes, no hierarchies just equality' (Female, Australia, LP/HSES). In sum, there was a general lack of sophistication with which young people pointed to the realities of economic inequality in their society. This is the result of their perception and life experiences, as well as the limited political language available to them to talk about growing inequality in an era when political engagement is individualised. As a result, the materialist responses were outnumbered by responses based on understanding equality as mainly an identity construct.

The postmaterialist responses were more homogenous across countries and group type, yet with a much stronger gender differentiation. Young women were much more likely than young men to focus on equality in terms of gender, ethnicity/race and same-sex identities. The responses that did not focus on single identity categories tended to approach them in a multi-issue way and argue for a response based on either respect for difference *or* equal treatment for all. Very few talked about how equality was achieved – i.e. through anti-discrimination laws, workplace practices or education – instead, many suggested that equality was enacted by everyday equal treatment in society, regardless of background and identity.

For example, young people's understandings based on equal treatment of different social identity groups were underpinned by a discourse of rights that meant everyone had the right to similar treatment, regardless of difference:

> The sort of things that come to mind are marriage equality, equality for women, equality for Aboriginals etc. (Female, Australia HP/LSES)

> When I think about equality the sort of things that come to mind are the "isms" like, racism, sexism, etc. Anything that has to do with someone else not being "as good" as another type of person and how we are trying to diminish the line through equality. (USA, Female, LP/LSES)

Some young people talked about equality and identity in terms of particular social groups that were marginalised in society. For example, an American woman argued:

> I do agree with you that we have more equality than before, but a lot of Americans use the face that President Obama is African-American to divert the attention from the inequalities in the U.S. There is still tremendous discrimination directed towards African-Americans and Obama's presidency doesn't and won't eliminate that. (Female, USA, HP/LSES)

Access to legal same-sex marriage was frequently seen as an indicator of equality in society in Australia, likely reflecting that this was part of the national election debate in the few weeks before the online discussions were held:

> Whenever I hear the word equality the first thing that always comes to mind is gay marriage because that's what I see being talked about all the time. (Male, Australia, HP/LSES)

While less common, some respondents articulated a notion of equality based on respect for difference, rather than sameness in treatment of different social groups. For example, a US man argued:

> I think about a very basic concept which is to simply to treat others with respect and dignity. In terms of Equality I then think of treating each other with respect and dignity regardless of Gender, Race, Religion, Political Beliefs, Ethnicity, Sexual Orientation, Age and any other factor that can be used to divide and discriminate. I also think of peace when I hear the word Equality, peace to be able to have free speech, peace to be able to demonstrate (within reason and also using peaceful methods), peace in our neighborhoods, schools, homes. Peace to be able to live our lives without having to worry about violence and discrimination. (Male, USA, LP/HSES)

Understanding rich vs. poor

Our follow-up inequality question effectively forced the participants to think about material inequality. We used a cartoon image that strongly implied that social and economic futures for individuals were determined by the socioeconomic status of the families that young people were born into. While many agreed that the image was a true reflection of their society in practice, they also strongly believed in exceptions, in that young people could lift themselves out of poverty through hard work and educational opportunities alone. There was very little critical engagement with the entrenched privilege of the rich that the cartoon portrayed, and limited acknowledgement of structural poverty and disadvantage. Instead, most respondents focused on the possibilities for moving out of poverty. Initial coding identified that there were broad difference between structural and individualised explanations of economic inequality in the responses. The majority of respondents emphasised individualised and agency-centred explanations, but there were also responses that emphasised the entrenched nature of economic disadvantage, and its social reproduction.

Among the structural responses there was general agreement that the social reproduction of SES was the main reason for an ongoing economic divide; i.e. the rich get richer, and the poor stay poorer, and a divide perpetuated by family circumstances. Our respondents offered explanations of the social reproduction of class difference and poverty, but there were subtle differences among these kinds of responses. For example, in contrasting quotes from privileged and disadvantaged young men in the UK, we can see that economic inequality is both inevitable and an abstraction for the more advantaged young man. The second quote from a highly politically engaged young man personalises the situation through reference to everyday lived-experiences and realities facing young people:

> I agree with it, there is a division. Like it or not it is there. You have the rich and then the poor or struggling who just can't cut it. It is sad but this is the world we live in. (Male, UK, LP/HSES)

> It represents modern society. If you come from a well off family you will have more options in life, but if you don't have much money you have to take what you can get generally. Under the current Government poor families are definitely being hit the hardest but there isn't enough full time jobs out there for everyone and this impacts young people because young people will miss out. Employers wont employ young inexperienced people if they can get away with it and will also pay them less if they can get away with it. Apprenticeships for example are very unfair. How's it right to pay young people less money for actually more

> work in most cases. Friends have told me they were treated like a workhorse while people sat on their computers on Facebook or whatever. Also £95 a week is ok-ish for a 16year old but it's a pittance to a 24 year old, but even 24 year olds are being treated like kids. (Male, UK, HP/LSES)

There were some direct mentions of how financial advantages accrue to the wealthy; and other, but rarer, mentions were made to the role of the state in either providing welfare to the poor to address their disadvantage or the role of the market in either perpetuating inequality, or underpinning state reduction of the differences between rich and poor. The first example below is one of a handful that spontaneously used the Occupy movement meme critiquing the privileged '1%':

> It shows a parallel that as generations go on, the wealthy stay wealthy and the poor stay poor. I do not like it, but I do agree that this is how it is in society today. The 1% (the people who do have the opportunity to change this) don't change anything due to greed. (Male, Australia, HP/LSES)

Similarly, a young USA respondent suggests that the wealthy are enabled by market forces and that 'upward mobility is dead':

> This is saying that the American Dream is slowly becoming an actual 'dream', and never will be a reality. Upward mobility in America is dead. The rich become richer and the poorer become poorer, or never get the opportunity to increase their wealth. This implies that even if you work extremely hard to move up in the economic social ladder, it'll be nearly impossible to move up. (Female, USA, HP/LSES)

However, most responses to this question were not structural explanations, and most did not see the image as an accurate depiction of social and economic inequality and its inevitable reproduction. Individualised responses were largely uniform, with two-thirds of responses arguing that, through hard work, the poor could overcome structural or family-based disadvantages. For example, an Australia woman argued: 'it is possible to achieve greater if you work harder and focus on what is important (e.g. saving money and not going on as many holidays)' (Female, Australia, LP/HSES).

There were other themes, such as that SES is simply a matter of choice and, more sympathetically, that the poor just needed to be given a chance to improve or could be best assisted by improved individual access to education. There was very little focus on the wealthy in society, just occasional suggestions that the wealthy also needed education in order to hold into their wealth, as that could not be taken for granted.

Overall, many of these respondents argue that there is personal agency involved in whether young people remain poor or disadvantaged in contemporary society. Therefore, socioeconomic status is constructed as a choice, and reveals the common-sense internalisation of individualised, neoliberal, ideas among many of the young people who participated in our research. For many, this reflects harsh and punitive current political discourse about the precarious economic status of young people, as has been identified in earlier research (Harris, Wyn, and Younes 2010; Tyler 2013).

However, this view is not simple or generalisable. There were subtle differences, especially from those of a lower SES who wanted to believe that there were constructive possibilities for themselves and their peers, and that agency and change in their individual economic situation was actually possible.

This first quote from a politicised young woman of higher socioeconomic status in the UK typifies this idea of choice and individual control that the poor ought to practice:

> I do not agree with this picture. This image is conveying that rich people will remain rich and poor people will remain poor! and will always be misery. I do not agree with it, we are individuals that makes different choices and believe me when I say, we can change this. I teach students everyday and I always tell them, 'if anyone can change your life it is you', you are the one who is controlling your life. (Female, UK, HP/HSES)

This view is echoed by a young USA-based women who herself has been disadvantaged, but is highly politically engaged. This suggests that politically engaged young people may not always be critical of prevailing political discourse about young people, and instead seek to conform to the status quo:

> One issue I take with the image is that it is the exact representation of a mentality that I so often see people use as an inhibition to actually applying themselves in the pursuit of anything better. Such people say "I was born poor, and I'll always be poor. It's the system's fault that I am this way so they should compensate me." NO. I acknowledge that I am currently generalizing and that this will not apply to everyone, but that mentality is just a lazy way to whine and ask for handouts. … I come from a large family that, to be honest, has been below the poverty line for most my life. I didn't even know it until I started putting myself through college and learned what the poverty line actually was! I never knew because my parents looked at what we had as what we had earned and not as something less than what we were entitled to by the system that was keeping us poor by the integral hand-me-down affect it can create. (Female, USA, HP/LSES)

Another example from a similarly placed young man in the USA is more sympathetic, suggesting that he is motivated by his experience of disadvantage to create political and individual change:

> This image may put people down and show them that despite the efforts made, they cannot change the life they come from. For me personally it's a motivation to change the life I grew up in so that later I can show my family that with hard work someone can change their class status. (Male, USA, HP/LSES)

It is important to appreciate the power of prevailing political discourse about disadvantaged young people and how it becomes internalised. The following excerpt from an interchange between a young man and woman, in the low participation and low socioeconomic status group in the UK, is illuminating about how authoritative messages and choice are constructed and reproduced by disadvantaged youth:

> Male: I do not agree with this. It does not make me feel good at all. It tells me that some of the youth sometimes have no chance of getting out of poverty to better themselves due to their family situation.
>
> Female: I think this image is totally wrong and I disagree with it, you can come from a working class background and still be successful and sending them wrong message to young people, it is suggesting that the future generations are going to live in divide, society divide. Also it is showing you have to be born in a rich family to be rich, this is not the case at all. It is saying society isn't changing and sending the wrong message to youngsters.

Male: Agree with you (name) I think I have made the mistake of saying that the poverty gets carried on in the family. But in many cases this does prove to not be the case. Thanks for pointing that out to me. Maybe my mind was just not thinking as wide as yours at that moment.
Female: Thanks I appreciate you understand.
Male: No problem (name). Have a nice day.

The implications for young people's political engagement

This research has several implications for future understandings of contemporary young people's political engagement and mobilisation. We need to compare and contrast their issue agendas, understanding of social and economic change and diverse everyday lived-experiences, in order to understand how young people do – or can – engage in politics. There are four main points we would like to make here.

First, issues matter for political engagement and arise from young people's everyday lived-experience of social and economic change. Both the survey and online discussion groups raised issues that reflected their own structured, lived-experience. When asked about equality and economic circumstances in their societies, younger people from a less-advantaged background were more likely to personalise their analysis and to talk about the effects of economic circumstances on either their peers or their families – this is Threadgold's (2011) 'reflexive experience of inequality' yet nevertheless underpinned by a powerful subjective understanding of personalised responsibility and choice (Wyn and Woodman 2006). While few talked about 'class', or, more broadly, in structurally determinist terms, they clearly understood disadvantage and difference as part of their self-actualisation process. However, equality was also understood by many of the young people – across all categories – in identity terms, suggesting that a lifestyle politics and choice biography agenda remains strong in the politicisation of young people. We need to better understand the interdependence between materialist and postmaterialist ideas in political engagement and mobilisation, as social movement scholars are starting to do (Glasius and Pleyers 2013).

Second, issues of concern differed across countries which suggests the importance of both analysing young people's political engagement comparatively, seeing it through the prism of the social and economic changes occurring within their locations, and thus, understanding young people's engagement within its political context.

Third, we need to appreciate how young people's understandings of political issues are shaped by the dominant discourses used in politics to describe social and economic change. Neoliberal ideas of opportunity and choice are prioritised within young people's explanations, over notions of structured disadvantage and inequality. Discussion of identity and access to rights are also individualised within young people's explanations, and rarely lead to a considered reflection on social, economic and cultural capital, or citizenship responsibilities.

Lastly, given the way young people understand issues, and social and economic change, what does this entail for existing opportunities for political engagement? The shift to individualised and novel forms of participation, particularly through digital media, expands opportunities for political engagement. However, they are not yet mobilising all young

people, as their use for politics is still largely concentrated among the highly educated. Potentially, young people who are not very politically engaged could be motivated to be so by opening up genuine, new political spaces, with particular attention to the everyday material issues that concern them. A major challenge for organised, formal politics is the incorporation of young people's concerns and everyday lived-experiences into governance of our increasingly complex societies.

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Notes on Contributors

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Appendix 1. Issue category coding notes

Australia

*Infrastructure includes:
Transport, roads, infrastructure, national broadband network.

*Other public services include:
Welfare, social security, pension, community services, military/defence funding, sports funding, arts funding, rehabilitation of juvenile offenders, the legal system, driver education/license age industry/agricultural support, Australian customs, more police/ambulance, alcohol and drug programmes, funding for essential services, hazard reduction burning, disaster recovery.

*Other social issues include:
Poverty, homelessness, inequality, issues relating to indigenous Australians, drink driving, binge drinking, drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse, Internet addiction, ageing population, moral standards, youth issues, cigarette ban, single parent issues, gambling, movie/game ratings, community spirit/well-being, human/social rights.

*Other includes:
Mining, media (censorship/reform, social media laws), religion, stem-cell research, genetic modification, animal welfare/live exports, euthanasia, agriculture and farming issues, drones, constitutional reform, sports, national flag/anthem, poor driver training, tourism, urbanisation, Australian-made products, keeping Australian traditions, science, privatisation, Australian adoptions, future, privacy, sale of farm lands to foreign investors, nanny state, parking expenses, power of big business, drought.

USA

*Infrastructure includes:
Transport, roads, infrastructure, oil, gas, energy.

*Other public services include:
Social security/welfare, food stamps, military, military spending, benefits for military/veterans, government regulation, retirement/seniors care, social programmes, social services.

*The political system includes:
Special interest groups influencing politicians, bipartisanship, separation of church and state, back to constitution, corruption, campaign finance reform, states' rights.

*Other social issues include:
Civil liberties, mass incarceration, poverty, homelessness, violence, drugs, legalisation of drugs, smoking, bullying, teen pregnancy, moral decline, peaceful coexistence, inequality between rich and poor, social freedom, human rights issues, population control, mass incarceration, housing, sequestration, internet security.

*International issues include:
War, terrorism, North Korea, Iran, national security, war in Middle East, Israel–Palestine conflict, foreign aid, Iraq war, Afghanistan, human trafficking, dependence on foreign oil, globalisation, American foreign policy, international relations, world hunger, bringing troops home, nuclear weapons, China taking over US, global economy, international trade, world peace.

*Other includes:
Religion, death penalty, freedom of speech, drones, abuse, GMOs in food, insurance, stem-cell research, rape in the military, space funding, food, legalising prostitution, acceptance of non-religion, reigning in the NSA and other agencies that are casually violating the privacy of our citizens, native American rights, fluoride in water, Monsanto poisoning all the crops.

UK
*The economy includes:
Economy, taxes, budget, spending, banks, financial sector regulation, tax avoidance, banker bonuses.

*Infrastructure includes:
Transport, roads, infrastructure, energy.

*Other public service (not welfare) includes:
Armed forces/defence, child care services, public service cuts, prison populations, maternity leave system, primary services, legal aid, police services, local council services, law, playing areas, libraries, more local leisure places, drug laws.

*Other social issues include:
Family breakdown, ageing population, drugs and alcohol issues, child abuse/child protection, Internet/social media, youth issues (teenage pregnancy), smoking, homelessness, social justice, bullying, poverty, overpopulation, binge drinking, social mobility, marriage (moral issues/values), human rights, food shortages.

*Other includes:
Scottish independence, prisoners voting rights, power station capacity, religion, gun crime in America, animal welfare/animal testing, corporate social responsibility, energy, intellectual property/copyright, privatisation of industries, cost of car insurance, death penalty, noise, tourism, weather, localism, societal productivity, general pessimism, capitalism, working credits, food safety, heating, corporate crime, media, fraud.