

Connected Communities

Connecting youth with geographic communities

Youth organisations and group identities in the UK during the twentieth century

Rhys Jones, Peter Merriman and Sarah Mills



Background

Executive Summary

The aim of the project was to examine how youth organisations connect young people to different geographic communities.

Drawing on a review of academic and policy literatures, the project interrogated key questions about the nature of youth communities, including: the role of youth organisations in shaping understandings of community; the role of youth organisations in bridging the divide within and between different communities; how youth organisations can help to promote divisions within and beyond communities; the different kinds of connections forged between youth, youth organisations and communities in different parts of the UK.

The project also comprised a scoping exercise that examined the potential to develop a larger project on the connections between youth, youth organisations and notions of community in the different territories of the UK; forming the basis of a 'new British history' of youth organisations. It also included a workshop, attended by academics and practitioners, which discussed the role of youth organisations in shaping the connections between young people, community and identity in the UK.

Researchers and Project Partners

Rhys Jones

PI, Aberystwyth University

Peter Merriman

CI, Aberystwyth University

Sarah Mills

CI, Loughborough University

Key words

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1. Introduction

The aim of the project was to examine how youth organisations connect young people to different geographic communities, including local communities, national communities and global communities. The project interrogated key questions about the nature of youth communities, including: the role of youth organisations in shaping understandings of community; the role of youth organisations in bridging the divide within and between different communities; how youth organisations can help to promote divisions within and beyond communities; the different kinds of connections forged between youth, youth organisations and communities in different parts of the UK.

The research review comprises two main sections. The first discusses the academic literature that has examined the connections between youth, youth organisations and geographic understandings of community. The second section addresses similar themes in the policy and practitioner literatures. We then elaborate on the findings of a scoping exercise that examined the potential to develop a larger project on the connections between youth, youth organisations and notions of community in the different territories of the UK; forming the basis of a 'new British history' of youth organisations. Subsequent sections provide details of the individuals who attended the workshop, recommendations for future research and action, the outputs achieved and planned, and a bibliography of key publications in the area.

2. Research review of the connections between youth, youth organisations and geographic communities

2.1 Academic literatures

Youth organisations have engaged with ideas of community in different ways over *time*. Historians have examined youth organisations primarily in terms of their emergence in the UK as responses to, and attempts to solve, youth deviance and moral fortitude (Kadish 1995; Springhall 1977; Wilkinson 1969; Warren 1986). Their emergence also needs to be positioned in a broader context of popular European youth movements in the early twentieth century (Stachura 1981; Laquer 1962).

The earliest youth movements in Britain were created and framed specifically along lines of religion, with separate gendered organisations for girls and boys; thus emphasising community cohesiveness within particular groups but perhaps tensions between different religious communities (Springhall et al 1983; Kyle 2007). The most popular of the early formats of youth organisations was the Scout Movement, officially founded in 1908 by Robert Baden-Powell and currently the largest youth organisation in the world. Scouting has remained a popular case-study for historians examining inter-war Britain (Dedman 1993; Proctor 2002; 2009; Warren 1986, 1990; Parsons 2004; Watt 1999; Macleod 1983; Mechling 2001; Block and Proctor 2009). Several other co-educational or secular youth organisations emerged in the 1920s that also remain active today. The Woodcraft Folk is a pacifist and left-wing youth organisation

founded in 1925 (Prynn 1083). Other co-educational movements emerged in the 1920s such as Urdd Gobaith Cymru founded in Wales in 1922 (Löffler 2006).

Academic studies of youth organisations have also drawn attention to their varying *spatial* configurations and connections. The notion of geographic scale is important here. Connecting youth to different types of geographic community – local, national and global – was seen by youth organisations as a way to foster ‘good citizenship’ (Mills 2013). Particular mechanisms were used to achieve these goals. Centrally, the role of outdoor education, nature and adventure were seen by youth organisations as an important part of their activities, importantly connecting symbolic ideas of the nation with structured interactions with nature (e.g. Matless 1995; 1998; Phillips 1997); particularly in relation to camping (Cupers 2008; Kyle 2007; Alexander 2009). However, international camps, rallies and jamborees that aimed to facilitate direct connections between young people and notions of community at a global scale have been under examined (Vallory 2012).

Youth organisations, too, through the discourses and activities that they sponsor, enable young people to ‘bridge the divide’ between different kinds of geographic community, for example, by encouraging young people to: engage with their local communities through small, group-based activities (weekly); participate in direct forms of community engagement such as fundraising as a way to complete their various learning programmes (monthly); camp at a nationally organised event or indeed visit National Headquarters (yearly); and attend an international camp or visit a group abroad (every two or three years).

Additionally, there is a complex politics to youth organisations and this can lead to the creation of tensions within and between particular communities. There have also been cases where youth organisations found themselves used as a barometer for national debates about youth or social change, for example the Scout Movement and its attitude towards communist youth in the 1920s and 1950s (Mills 2011b). At the same time, youth organisations can act as a means of overcoming community tensions, such as the work that been done by Muslim Scout groups in Cardiff (Mills 2009).

2.2 Policy literatures

There is broad agreement in the policy and practitioner literatures concerning the role that should be played by youth organisations, as well as the benefits that accrue to young people through engaging with them. Young people are said to become more active and confident contributors to society through their interactions with youth organisations (e.g. Youthlink Scotland 2009: 2; WAG 2007: 7). It is clear from all of the documents consulted, moreover, that youth organisations are actively concerned with shaping the identities of young people; most clearly in relation to notions of citizenship. Youth work is of especial value in engaging marginalised or disadvantaged young people (e.g. HMG 2012: 14; see also WAG 2007: 5; Scottish Executive 2007: 6).

In addition, the connection between young people, youth organisations and the notion of community is made with striking regularity. The understandings of community used are predominantly local ones (e.g. YouthLink Scotland 2011: 15). National understandings of community are also clearly apparent, with the most significant discourses connecting youth

work to national communities appearing in Scotland (e.g. Scottish Government 2009: 4). There also appears to be an important global sense of community that impacts on the work of youth organisations in the UK. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, for instance, is viewed as a context within which all youth policy and youth work must operate (e.g. Scottish Government 2009: 8). Despite the prevalence of these connections, little critical work has been undertaken on evaluating the extent and quality of these connections between young people, youth organisations and communities.

But, of course, part of the significance of youth work is its ability to allow young people to forge connections between communities at different geographic scales. First, these kinds of scalar links are created out of the practical experiences of partaking in youth work. For instance, fundraising in the locality may lead to international visits that are partly organised and sponsored by a national organisation. Second, it is clear that the institutional framework with which youth organisations operate – in relation to funding streams and coordination activities – enables connections to be made across different geographic scales. There are few attempts, however, to think through the implications of some of these scalar connections.

Finally, the overriding theme in the literature relates to the potential for youth work to overcome community tensions and divides; whether between different ethnic groups, different ages or different socio-economic classes (e.g. HMT and DCSF 2007: 6; see also HMG 2012: 14). The significance of youth work as a way of promoting 'bridging' social capital is especially apparent in Northern Ireland (see Hammond 2007/2008; Harland 2009).

The policy literature makes little reference to the possibility for youth organisations to reinforce or promote tensions within and across communities and this is a theme that requires further study.

3. Scoping study

The second strand of the project involved a scoping study to examine the suitability of the archives of Urdd Gobaith Cymru and the Scout Movement in Wales to act as the basis of a case study, which would feed into a larger project concerned with writing a 'new British history' of youth organisations.

The first archive researched was that of Urdd Gobaith Cymru in the National Library of Wales. The archive contains 199 boxes of published material (books, periodicals, Eisteddfod publications) and unpublished administrative documents. We examined two key themes within the archive, namely the material concerning summer camps and on the role played by the Urdd in promoting internationalism, humanitarianism and global forms of citizenship. The information on these two themes ranged from programmes of activities for members to detailed accounts of the administration of the camps and exchange visits. The archive did not contain a large amount of information about the impacts of these activities on the identities of the Urdd's members and we would want to address this omission in the larger follow-on project through the use of oral history interviews.

The second archive researched was the Welsh Scout Council archive in Llantwit Major, South Wales. This archive holds 529 assorted items including annual reports, correspondence and policy documents. There is clear potential for various sections of the archive to answer

significant questions. In particular, material on the early activities of Scout Groups in Wales and subsequent development of a devolved organisational structure in 1925, as well as key international events such as Jamboree Cymru held over the last century, illustrate attempts to connect Welsh youth to local, British and international communities. However, there is also material that highlights some of the difficulties surrounding scouting's 'place' in Wales and hints at a tense relationship between scouting and the Urdd. This is one avenue that could be further explored through oral histories within a larger research project.

4. Workshop

A workshop was organised for sixteen academics and practitioners working on or with youth organisations. The academics came from a range of disciplines and the practitioners worked with young people in a variety of different contexts and in different territories of the UK. The delegates were:

Paul Glaze

Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services

Jill Gloster

Scouts Wales

Peter Hopkins

Geography, Newcastle University

Rhys Jones

Aberystwyth University

Richard Kyle

Strathclyde University

Peter Merriman

Aberystwyth University

Sarah Mills

Loughborough University

Grant Poiner

Clubs for Young People Wales

Daniel Scott-Davies

Scout Association

Jim Sweeney

Youthlink Scotland

Gillian Wakeman

YMCA Wales

Allen Warren

History, University of York

Dominic Weinberg

National Council of Voluntary Youth Services

Geraint Whittaker

Ethnic Youth Support Team

Howard Williamson

Social Policy, University of Glamorgan

Hayley Wood

Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services

Draft copies of the academic and policy reviews were circulated to the attendees prior to the workshop and their input and feedback was gleaned during the workshop. The input from the attendees was also useful in providing ideas for the proposed follow-up project and will provide useful feedback for the policy briefing.

5. Recommendations for future research and action

A number of key areas for future research and dissemination have emerged from the project. In particular, we have identified the following needs:

1. To develop a conceptual understanding of the role of youth work. Has this role changed over time? Is it the same in each UK territory?

2. To ascertain whether all youth organisations seek to achieve the same goals. Can differences between their goals lead to tensions?
3. To examine whether youth work broadens the geographic horizons of young people or are more parochial forms of community identity promoted.
4. To understand how effective youth organisations are at bridging divides within and between different communities.
5. To appreciate the effect of the recession on youth organisations. Does it present serious challenges or potential opportunities?

In order to fulfil these recommendations we intend to undertake the following:

- To develop a large-scale research project which will examine how youth organisations have promoted the identities of young people since the second world war; particularly those identities that are linked to different kinds of geographic community. The project will be based on archival work and oral history research and will seek to present a 'new British history' of youth organisations.
- To disseminate the findings of the academic and policy-related reviews to a range of academic and non-academic beneficiaries, including government departments in each of the UK territories, non-governmental organisations concerned with young people, youth organisations and community.

6. Outputs

Completed to date:

Jones, R., Merriman, P. and Mills, S. (2012) *Literature and Policy Review of Young People, Youth Organisations and Community in the UK*. Working paper circulated to workshop delegates.

Jones, R., Merriman, P. and Mills, S. (2012) *Young People, Youth Organisations and the Role of Community*. Policy briefing (drafted and awaiting comments from the workshop delegates). Cost borne by Aberystwyth University because of its outreach commitment.

In preparation:

- The first is a paper that examines the role of youth organisations in shaping ideas of national identity in the UK. It has been commissioned as part of a special issue of the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, and edited by Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood.
- The second focuses on how the Urdd has used camping activities to shape Welsh citizenship. This will be submitted to *Cultural Geographies*.
- The third paper will examine the significance of the Urdd in promoting internationalism, humanitarianism and early forms of global citizenship, particularly through their international visits and international exchange programmes. This paper will be submitted to *Political Geography*.

- The fourth paper will examine the difficult position occupied by the Welsh Scouting Movement; as an organisation closely aligned with the British nation-building project but also one that has sought to attune itself progressively to the needs of Wales and Welsh youth. This paper will be submitted to the *Journal of Historical Geography*.

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