

Mobility for Me but Not for Others: The Contradictory Cosmopolitan Practices of Contemporary White British Youth

Sociology

1–17

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0038038521999565

journals.sagepub.com/home/soc**Avril Keating** 

University College London, UK

Abstract

This article seeks to problematise the perception that young people are committed cosmopolitans by highlighting some of the contradictory and contingent practices that young White British youth engage in. To do so, I explore a contradiction that emerged in my recent projects when young people talked about mobility and migration, namely how some White British youth want (and assume) freedom of movement for themselves but are opposed to freedom of movement when it involves immigrants coming to Britain. Here I argue that this can be viewed as an effort to enjoy the benefits of a cosmopolitan lifestyle (particularly through geographical mobility) while nonetheless wishing to limit opportunities for cultural Others to do likewise. This manifestation, I suggest, should be seen as a one-way form of cosmopolitanism that is not just contradictory, but also a reflection of the mixed messages young people in Britain receive about mobility, migration, multiculturalism, citizenship and individualism.

Keywords

attitudes towards immigrants, cosmopolitanism, cosmopolitan practices, migration, mobility, young people, youth

Introduction

Survey data from the USA and the EU have repeatedly suggested that young people are more cosmopolitan than previous generations and that contemporary youth are more accepting of cultural diversity, immigration, and international governance (see Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Sloam and Henn, 2019). While these data highlight how cultural

Corresponding author:

Avril Keating, UCL Institute of Education, University College London, Gower St, London, WC1E 6BT, UK.

Email: a.keating@ucl.ac.uk

and political values have changed over time, this article will illustrate that one should not necessarily infer from these trends that young people are therefore committed cosmopolitans. Drawing on qualitative data, this article will instead argue that youth support for cosmopolitan values can be contingent and contradictory, and can rest on the belief that they would like to experience the personal benefits of a cosmopolitan world, while at the same time wishing to limit the opportunities others have to do likewise. These contradictions become especially apparent in youth discussions about mobility and migration, and this article will shed light on one contradiction in particular – namely that some young people are keen to work, travel and live in other countries, yet are strongly opposed to cultural engagement that arises as a consequence of immigrants coming *to* Britain. In short, it seems that some young people do not want their engagement with cosmopolitanism to start at ‘home’.

To make this case, this article will present narratives from White British (WB) youth that illustrate the contradictory and contingent way that some young people can engage in cosmopolitan practices. These data were drawn from two recent projects that collected qualitative interview data from young people in England aged 16–29. In addition to focusing on the contradictions in youth narratives, this article also seeks to contribute to the growing body of research that examines cosmopolitan practices – that is, how individuals actually engage with cosmopolitanism in their everyday lives. This previous research has already highlighted that cosmopolitanism is, in practice, a flexible cultural outlook that is neither static nor entirely consistent (see Skrbis and Woodward, 2007). Meanwhile, others have shown that some cosmopolitans are driven more by strategic self-interest than by the ideals that are often espoused in theoretical debates (see Snee, 2016; Weenink, 2008). What this article will add is the suggestion that cosmopolitan practices are sometimes a one-way street, an opportunity for the self that should not necessarily be extended to cultural Others. To discuss the implications of this form of youth engagement, this article will also link the cosmopolitan practices literature to some of the concurrent debates in youth studies (individualisation) and other areas of citizenship studies (such as the cultural ‘backlash’, the culturalisation of citizenship and the continuing influence of colonialism and racial and ethnic hierarchies). First, however, I set out the theoretical debates on cosmopolitan practices that initially inspired this analysis.

Theorising Cosmopolitan Practices in Everyday Life

Cosmopolitanism is a concept that has attracted considerable attention in the past two decades, both in popular discourse and in academic debates (although the underlying understandings do not necessarily overlap). The latter has generated different ways of defining, theorising and researching this concept, including both normative and/or philosophical approaches that highlight the *potential* of this worldview, and more empirically focused studies that seek to capture how cosmopolitanism is actually *practised* by individuals in their day-to-day lives (see Delanty, 2018 for an overview of the field). Despite the differences in approaches and emphases, there is general agreement that at its core, cosmopolitanism involves ‘openness’ to other cultures values, and experiences (Woodward and Skrbis, 2018).

This article is concerned with cosmopolitan practices, and in this sub-field, there are four discernible and inter-related trends in recent empirical research. First, there has been an increased focus on the different conditions in which cosmopolitanism emerges (or does not emerge) in different spaces, places and time-periods (see Jeffrey and McFarlane, 2008). Second, the field has moved from focusing on extra-ordinary cosmopolitan elites to exploring the ‘ordinary’ cosmopolitanism that can be enacted in everyday life (see Skrbis and Woodward, 2007). Third, and relatedly, there has been increasing recognition that cosmopolitan ‘open-ness’ can be manifested in different ways, whether it be: attitudes towards other cultures; feeling a sense of belonging to a transnational community; expressing support for international governance and globalisation; or showing interest in travel/migration to other cultures or in cross-cultural consumption of goods, culture or media (Vertovec and Cohen, 2002). This article focuses in particular on cosmopolitan cultural engagement (Savage et al., 2010) as manifested in youth attitudes towards other cultures and showing interest in travel/migration to other cultures.

Fourth, various scholars also have tried to categorise the different *types* of cosmopolitanism that can exist in practice. At one end of the spectrum, there are ‘genuine’ or moral versions of cosmopolitanism (discussed in Snee, 2016), or individuals that demonstrate more ‘dedicated’ commitment to this worldview. For example, Weenink (2008) argues that dedicated cosmopolitans view the world as a wonderful playground that should be explored and enjoyed; borders should not be an impediment to this exploration; and individuals should be open-minded and flexible when encountering different cultures. These more idealist views can be contrasted with ‘pragmatic’ or ‘strategic’ versions of cosmopolitanism that are underpinned ‘not by ideals of national unity in diversity, but by understandings of global competitiveness, and the necessity to strategically adapt as an individual to rapidly shifting personal and national contexts’ (Mitchell, 2003: 388). Weenink (2008) found that these strategies are used by what he calls ‘pragmatic’ cosmopolitan parents, who view openness and cultural exchange not as worthy ends in themselves, but as a means of accruing a competitive advantage for their children that can be used, for example, to ‘get ahead’ in the contemporary labour market. These messages can also be assimilated by students, who are perhaps just as likely as parents to conceptualise cosmopolitanism as a form of cultural capital that can be used strategically to improve their chances of getting work that befits the upper and middle classes in a global economy (Power et al., 2013).

While dedicated forms of cosmopolitan practices are closer to the theoretical ideal, it is arguable that all forms are fraught with contradictions and inequalities. For example, the mobility aspirations of young people in the Global North are underpinned by privilege, not just in terms of having the rights and resources to travel, but also in terms of cultural, geopolitical and in many cases, racial inequalities (Benson, 2014). The most blatant examples of the geopolitical and racial inequalities are perhaps the highly popular volunteer tourism/gap year projects that facilitate young people from the Global North to participate in projects that ‘save’ Global South countries (see Cheung Judge, 2017; Snee, 2016). All too often, providers and participants approach these experiences as if they are consuming a product (i.e. the ‘exotic Other’) rather than truly engaging with/learning from different cultures; as such, they offer only a thin veneer of cosmopolitanism at best. At their worst, they reinforce the anti-cosmopolitan and unequal relationships that they

are supposed to challenge (see discussion in Snee, 2016). Yet even when participants are aware of their privilege and seek to address the imbalance, Benson (2014) argues that the very movement of people from the Global North to the Global South is linked to (post-) colonial power relations that are, in turn, underpinned by deep-seated assumptions about cultural and racial hierarchies (Bhambra, 2017). Savage et al.'s (2010: 612) work also suggests that cosmopolitan practices have a further 'white privilege' problem, noting that while White Britons often wish to learn more about the 'Other' through their cultural consumption, they tend to seek out an 'Other' 'that is congenial to the world-views of the white, educated middle classes'. In other words, for White westerners, cultural cosmopolitanism often seems to involve seeking out difference that is not *too* different.

Contingent and Contradictory Forms of Cosmopolitan Practice

Although it is tempting to view these types as unique and static, several scholars have warned that the everyday practice of cosmopolitanism is best seen as a spectrum, rather than a singular, universal or coherent position. For example, Skrbis and Woodward (2007: 735) suggest that cosmopolitanism should be thought of as a flexible cultural outlook that 'is deployed and retracted' by individuals, depending on the context and situation. In other words, individuals are not necessarily cosmopolitan at all times and in all contexts; instead, people shift between subject positions as they encounter different forms of 'otherness' in their everyday lives. Furthermore, Skey (2013, 2015) argues that individuals can simultaneously hold contrasting, and even seemingly contradictory, views about Others; in his empirical research, he found that 'at one moment individuals will engage with "others" on equal terms without a second thought and, at another, lambast "them" for a perceived slight or challenge' (Skey, 2015: 284). This may constitute what he describes as a fragile form of cosmopolitanism, but it also enabled him to make sense of data in which some individuals he encountered simultaneously expressed racist views *and* class-based cosmopolitan solidarity with cultural Others (Skey, 2013). These traces of cosmopolitanism may be far from the ideal types of cosmopolitanism that have been proposed in utopian theory, but he argues that the 'contingent and fragile elements [of cosmopolitanism-in-practice] should not be elided, but rather placed at the forefront of our investigations, thereby allowing us to theorise these types of processes with more precision' (Skey, 2013: 239). This will, in turn, help us to understand more about 'the changing repertoire of discursive resources [individuals draw on] as they encounter different groups, opportunities and challenges' (Skey, 2013: 239).

This article seeks to follow Skey's suggestion and to explore one of the contradictory and fragile forms of cosmopolitanism that emerged in some youth narratives during two recent research projects with young people in England. England is an apposite site in which to examine these fragile forms of cosmopolitanism because its relationships with internal and external Other(s) is at a critical juncture and has attracted renewed public and academic debate. In the 2000s, survey data suggested that the British public was becoming more accepting of racial and ethnic diversity (Ford, 2008) and these trends contributed to the sense that Britain was becoming a cosmopolitan and 'post-racial' society (Patel and Connelly, 2019). It was an uncomfortable surprise to some, then, when the issue of immigration became such a salient and polarising aspect of public and political

debates before and after the 2016 Brexit referendum. Some attributed the resurgence of anti-immigrant sentiment to the Brexit campaign itself and to a post-2008 backlash against globalisation and cosmopolitan elites (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). However, while political entrepreneurs sought to exploit public concerns during the Brexit campaign, these tensions are rooted in long-standing and sustained anti-immigrant campaigns in the right-wing media; increasingly restrictive changes to citizenship policies introduced by successive governments; and the racial and ethnic legacies of Britain's colonial and imperial past (Bhambra, 2017; Garner, 2015; Shabi, 2019). Put simply, Brexit merely revealed that racism(s) and Other-ing had not, in fact, waned but had instead shifted its focus and the way it is expressed in public (Patel and Connelly, 2019).

In post-Brexit analyses, young people are frequently hailed as being more cosmopolitan than previous generations and presented as a source of optimism for the future (see Sloam and Henn, 2019). To deepen this debate, this article argues that youth cosmopolitan practices are often contradictory rather than deeply committed, and that these practices are fraught with many of the same tensions that are apparent in older people's practices. Here, I focus on one contradiction in particular, namely that some White British youth are keen to practise cultural cosmopolitan engagement when it involves their own aspirations for travel and migration. Yet their openness to other cultures only extends to themselves going 'out there'; these young people were, nonetheless, opposed to immigrants coming *to* Britain, and uncomfortable with the cultural diversity and Otherness that was present in their 'home' environment. In the Discussion section, I argue that this constitutes not just a strategic form of cosmopolitanism, but also a highly contingent, one-way form of the concept. Furthermore, I will argue that these contradictory practices can be explained (at least in part) by other dominant discourses that young people are exposed to – namely, individualisation, the backlash against cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, and the complex relationship between race, culture and British citizenship. In the process, this article thus links the cosmopolitan practices literature to wider debates in youth studies and the sociology and politics of contemporary citizenship.

Data and Methods

The data presented below emerged from two different projects that took place between 2013 and 2017. The first project was a mixed method, multi-year study of youth opportunities and civic values after the 2008 Global Economic Crisis. For this project, over 100 in-depth, individual, qualitative interviews were undertaken across England with young people aged 18–26. These interviews were primarily undertaken face-to-face by a team of academic researchers over the course of 2013 and 2014. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowballing strategies and, as a result, the achieved sample reflects the social cleavages that give rise to different youth opportunities and experiences (i.e. gender, ethnicity, occupation, educational level and geographic location; see Franceschelli and Keating, 2018). In the course of the interviews, young people were asked a range of open-ended questions about their education, employment and housing histories, their aspirations for the future and their attitudes towards social and political life in Britain today. The latter included questions about their attitudes towards (and experiences of) equal opportunities, prejudice and the benefits system.

The second project was smaller in scale and scope. The primary purpose of the project was to examine young people's attitudes towards, and aspirations after, the 2016 Brexit referendum. During 2017, the project team conducted a series of group and individual interviews with young people aged 15–29 around England ($N = 73$). In order to maximise the range of youth voices and perspectives in the sample, this project employed a purposive sampling strategy and recruited respondents in a range of settings, including: Russell Group universities in London and Manchester; youth clubs in London and the Greater Manchester area; selective and comprehensive schools and colleges in the west of England; a Further Education college and a youth employability service in the south-east of England. White British youth are over-represented in the final sample, but otherwise, the final sample is balanced in terms of gender, class, educational level and geography. As part of this project, young people were asked about their attitudes towards the referendum and its aftermath, but also about their mobility plans for the future, their national and European identities, and their attitudes towards immigration to Britain.

As these project descriptions suggest, neither of these projects was originally designed or intended to examine cosmopolitan practices. Thus, in keeping with Skrbis and Woodward's (2007: 732) work, I 'do not claim to be interviewing cosmopolitans, or talking directly about cosmopolitanism with the participants'. Rather, this theme emerged as part of the inductive and deductive coding process that I undertook during the thematic analysis of each project dataset (see Clarke et al., 2015). This article focuses in particular on young people's discussions about their aspirations for mobility, which is treated here as a key indicator of their expression of (and interaction with) cosmopolitan practices. Geographical mobility is not a precondition for (or an automatic guarantee of) cosmopolitanism. Moreover, as noted in the discussion above, mobility aspirations can be motivated by racist, xenophobic and/or consumerist attitudes that are antithetical to cosmopolitan ideals. Nonetheless, because of the cultural exchange that takes place as a result of travel to 'foreign' countries, mobility is still commonly understood as 'a building block . . . of the cosmopolitan experience' and an indication of potential cosmopolitanism (Skrbis et al., 2014: 615–616).

The analysis presented below first describes some general trends in the expressions of youth cosmopolitanism that emerged during from the thematic analysis. The discussion then narrows its focus to explore the narratives of three young White British (WB) men from England: 'Frank' (22) comes from a deprived background and left school with few qualifications but now has a skilled manual job; 'Nick' (23) a recent university graduate from a lower middle-class family with relatively high cultural capital; and 'Harry' (17) is a high school student from a middle-class background. At the time of the interviews, all three lived in small towns (one in the north of England, two in the south-east).

These cases were selected because their interview data illustrate a contradiction in youth cosmopolitan practices that has not been explored elsewhere (namely wanting to experience outward mobility for themselves while also opposing inward mobility for Others). These narratives were outliers in the datasets because of their *explicit* expression of this type of contradictory practice; as such, it is not claimed that these practices are widespread among White British youth. Nonetheless, although the number of case studies is small, the analysis below adds to current understandings of the complexities of cosmopolitanism-in-practice, and highlights how youth practices are shaped by the

multiple contradictory discourses that are in the public sphere. These cases also help to problematise the perception of ‘cosmopolitan youth’ that has come to dominate popular and academic accounts of contemporary youth. Surveys have shown that cosmopolitan practices are associated with social class and higher levels of education (see Keating, 2016), yet these cases demonstrate that this one-way engagement can be found in all educational levels and social classes. This article thus also adds to existing qualitative research that shows that exclusionary attitudes are not the exclusive preserve of any gender, class or ethnicity (see Keating and Janmaat, 2020; Patel and Connelly, 2019).

Contradictions and Conditionality in Youth Cosmopolitan Practices

Although the primary focus of this article is three case studies, it is worth noting (briefly) the wider patterns that emerged in the data in order to provide context for how these three cases offer a distinct perspective. Youth aspirations for geographic mobility emerged frequently during the interviews conducted for both projects. Almost all of the participants in the Brexit project described hopes for future mobility, be it for holidays, gap years, study or work. Exploring the world outside of England was depicted as a highly desirable, life-affirming experience and often linked to their transition to independent adulthood (see also Frändberg, 2015). Freedom of movement was typically taken for granted, even among those from deprived backgrounds (although there were concerns about increased cost and visa paperwork post-Brexit).

When talking about their mobility plans, some (but not all) explained their motivation in terms that resonate with the types of cosmopolitan practice set out above. That said, in most cases, these narratives could not be categorised as either purely ‘dedicated’ dispositions or straight-forwardly ‘strategic’ choices. Instead, most of the participants described their motivations in a way that combined more ideal-type discursive statements (e.g. cultural curiosity, support for supranational governance) along with what one young woman described as ‘selfish’ reasons. The latter often included personal development goals rather than an explicit desire for accruing skills to compete in the global labour market, as Weenink (2008) has suggested. Furthermore, in contrast to the ‘exotic’ locations being explored by the young people in Snee’s (2016) work, the destinations that the participants aspired to travel to were typically in Europe, North America or Australia. Given the cultural proximity of these countries, this pattern fits more with Savage et al.’s (2010: 612) conclusion that young people in particular are drawn to cultures that are similar to their own. This ‘different but similar’ approach to cultural engagement was rarely explicitly acknowledged during the interviews, but is reflected in Julia’s (17, WB) account of her mobility aspirations:

I actually want to experience how lives are different in similar-ish countries but actually how cultures change . . . I’m quite a home bird so I quite like being around things that I know, so [for my study abroad year] I’d probably try and stay in Europe where it’s a little bit more familiar.

The tensions inherent in ‘safe’ engagement with cultural differences and between ideal and strategic approaches to cosmopolitanism have been discussed elsewhere (not least Savage et al., 2010; Snee, 2016). Likewise, Benson (2014) and Cheung Judge (2017)

have drawn attention to the privileged position of those who get to experience mobility. What I wish to focus on here, then, is a contradictory position that has not been discussed elsewhere, namely that some White British youth want (and assume) freedom of movement for themselves but are opposed to freedom of movement when it involves immigrants coming to Britain. The following case studies illustrate the ways in which this contradiction was expressed in three youth narratives, before considering why these attitudes emerged and what the implications are.

Frank (22): 'I'd Like to Experience Different Cultures. . .' Frank was living and working in a town in the south-east of England during his in-depth interview in 2013. Frank left school at 17 with limited qualifications and churned through several low-skill jobs with limited prospects before eventually securing a full-time and highly skilled job with a prestigious local employer. Throughout the interview, and without prompting, Frank mentions his desire to travel and work abroad. For example, when asked where he would like to be in 10 years' time, he told us that he wanted to be in 'a very well-paid job, travelling round the world'. Explaining why, Frank told us:

I've been in this house for 22 years, you do start to think . . . you know, you see the Seven Wonders of the World, the Pyramids, things like that, and you think 'I'd like to see that, I'd like to go there'. I'd like to experience different cultures and the way things are done in other places.

These were not just idle words. Through his employer, Frank had applied for a scheme that would enable him to work in another European country for three months. Frank was also considering moving to South-East Asia to spend time with his father, who had lived and worked abroad for many years. Frank's account suggests that he had only limited contact with his father when he was growing up, and his father's experience of living abroad does not appear to be driving his own desire to live abroad. Instead, it seemed to be part of a desire for self-betterment, to make up for the education he had missed out on while 'messing about' at school during his adolescence. In this way, Frank's mobility aspirations appear to be part of an effort to acquire cosmopolitan cultural capital, much like the students and parents in Weenink's (2008) study (see also Power et al., 2013; Snee, 2016).

Frank's suggestion that he would 'like to experience different cultures and the way things are done in other places' chimes with one of the key tenets of cosmopolitanism and suggests that he has some of the dispositions that are associated with this worldview. In other ways, however, Frank's attitudes and actions completely contradict this openness. Most striking is the fact that Frank is strongly opposed to immigrants coming to Britain. When asked why, Frank claims that this opposition is not based on race or ethnicity, but rather on his belief that many immigrants have not come to Britain to work but rather to access (and abuse) the social welfare system. As he explains:

I've got many foreign friends, lots of Polish at work, Latvians, Slovaks, no problem. I just think the people that come over here and obviously take the piss [out of the social welfare system] basically . . . I just feel that some of them don't come over here to work.

The idea that immigrants come to Britain to 'scrounge' rather than work is widespread in social and media discourse, and it is linked to the view that immigrants pose an economic threat and a drain on scarce social welfare resources (see discussion in Keating and

Janmaat, 2020). However, Frank's voting preferences suggest that there is, in fact, an ethnic and racial dimension to his attitudes, and that he also views immigrants as a cultural threat. Frank voted for the far-right British National Party (BNP) in the past (largely because of their clear opposition to immigration) and he acknowledges that the party's platform is racist. Thus, although Frank tries to foreground an economic explanation for his attitudes towards immigration, it is clear that there is also a cultural and racial dimension to his opposition.

Regardless of the ideological or discursive driver, Frank's interview suggests that he wants to have the freedom to travel and work abroad but wants to limit the opportunities that are available to 'foreigners' to come to Britain and work. Similar themes emerged in Nick's interview.

Nick (23), the Aspiring Immigrant Who Is Strongly Opposed to Immigrants Coming to Britain. Nick was living in the north of England when we spoke to him in 2014. Having just graduated from university with an accountancy degree, Nick had started working in an unskilled job (in a packing factory) and saving up money to go and live in Australia. When asked about his plans for the future, Nick told us: 'I'd love to live in Australia to be honest, by the beach, have a nice little house, go to work, come back. That's the life. BBQ, a few beers. Couldn't imagine 'owt better.' Australia is, in Nick's view, 'paradise' and his desire to move there was linked to his view of post-university life as an exciting time, full of new experiences and fresh horizons:

I've just got my degree, I'm young and fresh, I'm just ready to get out there in the big world. I just want to try and move [abroad], I just want to do everything in life – do you know what I mean?

Travel to Australia, it seems, is viewed by Nick as an exotic, utopian adventure; in this way, Nick's description of his travel plans chimes with one of the key discourses that Snee (2016) identified in the narratives of young 'gap year' travellers.

Nick is looking to move to paradise as he believes Britain is 'going downhill' and has limited opportunities for young people like himself. As a result, he tells us: 'I'll do anything, me, to get me out of this country, that's how I feel at the minute.' One of the reasons for Britain's decline, he believes, is the fact that too many immigrants have been allowed to 'flood' in. In stark contrast to the happy-go-lucky view of life he presents throughout the rest of the interview, he is very exercised about this issue: 'the only issue I feel so, so, so strongly about is immigration, and I really do. I'm not a racist person or anything but I just can't stand it, it gets me so mad.' Thus, although he wanted to become an immigrant himself, and was aware of the procedural challenges he would face to become one, Nick was deeply opposed to the idea of immigrants coming *to* Britain; or as he put it, the thought of immigrants 'flooding' into Britain 'just makes me feel sick to be honest'. Again, much like Frank, Nick draws on both economic and cultural threat discourses in order to justify his concern. Most immigrants, he suggests, are 'dodgy' as they do not work 'properly' and do not pay taxes. Muslim immigrants are depicted as being even more alarming, and as presenting a serious threat to social harmony in Britain.

By contrast, Nick really admires the Australian government's approach to immigration, and Muslim immigrants in particular, which he contrasts with what he implies is the overly liberal and tolerant system in Britain:

It's like, say, Muslims come in, we [in Britain] have to follow their rules and stuff, do you know what I mean? But, like, the Australian government, their Prime Minister released a statement saying 'it's our country, you've come to live in it, you follow our rules. We don't follow yours' . . . I think that's so right . . . I think they've got their head screwed on right. It's so hard to get in there. So I'd love to do it – go and live in paradise.

Based on these words, it seems that Australia is to be admired because it *limits* cultural diversity and makes it difficult for groups that Nick considers to be cultural Others to gain access. This suggests that Nick's aspirations to move to Australia are ultimately less about exploring a new country and culture, and more about *avoiding* engagement with cultural Others that he fears are taking over his hometown and home culture.

Harry (17), the Pro-European Who Wants His Hometown to Be Less European. Harry took part in a group interview about Brexit in 2017 ($N = 6$, all male, all WB). At the time, all of the participants in this group were in high school studying music. The group expressed a range of positions on Brexit: one being completely disinterested, two being Leave supporters and three (including Harry) describing themselves as Remain supporters. In this group, Harry's contributions stood out because his interactions with others illustrated Skrbis and Woodward's (2007: 735) contention that, in practice, cosmopolitanism is a flexible cultural outlook that 'is deployed and retracted', depending on the topic, the context and the interlocutors.

Like the others in this group interview, Harry viewed geographical mobility and travel as an essential (and desirable) part of his career path. All of the participants hoped to have a career in the music industry, and Harry described how he hoped to study music at university before gigging around Europe, and especially north-eastern Europe, where he felt musicians in his genre would be treated 'like royalty'. Although Harry's future aspirations were tied to his ability to be geographically mobile, freedom of movement was not one of the reasons that Harry described himself as a Remain supporter; like the others in his group, he believed that he would still be easily able to travel and work abroad after Brexit, it would simply cost a bit more. Instead, Harry primarily believed the UK should remain in the European Union because of his parents' and his own concerns about the economic risks of Brexit and the breakdown of relationships with EU countries.

During the interview, it became clear from the exchanges that he had with his friends that Harry had mixed feelings about the cultural diversity that had emerged in the local area as a result of increased EU migration. On the one hand, Harry agreed that increased cultural diversity was one of the positive changes that had taken place in recent years, and it was something he would miss if it were to disappear. Yet Harry also expressed concern that his town had become 'too' European, and that 'something' was being lost as a result. Although Harry was very confident and articulate in other parts of the discussions, on this subject he struggled to find the 'right' words to express his views and seemed to self-censor and self-correct. And when he is challenged by one of the other

participants (whose views were closer to Weenink's (2008) 'dedicated cosmopolitan' type), Harry was quick to assert that he was not opposed to EU migrants per se, while nonetheless signalling his discomfort that there are so many cultural changes taking place. This tension is illustrated in the following exchange:

Harry: Well, particularly in my town . . . there is just . . . if you go into the town centre there is at least five to eight Eastern European food shops, like, Polish food shops. And it is a shame because it just . . . That takes away the sense of Britishness that, you know, the sense of being British, that just implies that . . . Well, I think it just sort of makes everything more European. That's when I do agree with like, we should be proud to be British, like, we shouldn't let . . . well no, I sound racist but I just . . . I don't know, I don't at the same time, but it's just something . . .

Calum: What's wrong with letting them come?

Harry: Yeah, yeah, no I've not got a problem with letting them [EU migrants] come. It's just . . . You think, come on, this is an English town, why are there so many European shops?

The impulse to self-censor his views in this forum may be because Harry is conscious that these opinions could clash with one of the central social norms of contemporary culture (i.e. do not express explicitly racist or anti-immigrant views; Ford, 2008). However, others in this group had expressed openly hostile views towards immigration, and while there was pushback from other participants, there was no immediate social sanction apparent (a similar pattern emerged in another group interview conducted earlier that day at the same site). It may also clash with his perception of his own identity: that is, Harry may view himself as being tolerant and accepting of cultural diversity, and in this case, his admission that he is uncomfortable with 'too much' diversity may not sit comfortably with his self-perception. Regardless of the underlying reason, the end result is arguably the same: much like Frank and Nick, Harry wishes to go out and enjoy freedom of movement in the wider world but wishes to limit the extent to which immigrants can bring their culturally diverse practices to his town.

Discussion

These three case studies exemplify one of the ways in which individuals can engage in (and with) cosmopolitan practices in contradictory ways. On the one hand, these individuals appear eager to embrace the benefits of a cosmopolitan lifestyle (and particularly the geographical mobility that it affords). In addition, they each expressed some views that are in keeping with the attitudes and aspirations that are associated with cosmopolitan citizens (such as interest in learning more about other cultures, support for international governance or a desire to travel to other countries). Yet while all three were keen to take advantage of opportunities for mobility outside of Britain, it also became clear that they all wished to limit the opportunities that others (or at least the frequently demonised 'Immigrant Other') have to engage in similar practices, if it meant they would be coming to Britain.

Cosmopolitanism as a One-Way Street

Their contradictory attitudes towards mobility and migration suggest that the individuals in question are only open to cultural diversity as long as there is not 'too much' diversity and if cultural diversity is 'out there' and not present at 'home' in their town and their country. This discomfort is apparent even if they hold a dim view of contemporary Britain and of 'work shy' British people (as was the case in Frank's and Nick's interviews). However, unlike the 'ordinary cosmopolitans' in Skrbis and Woodward's (2007) study, the individuals I describe above are not worried about losing their home culture to Americanisation or concerned about the cultural homogenisation that globalisation might bring. Instead, they seem to be concerned that contemporary life brings *too much* cultural diversity into their everyday lives and their home country. It seems that they only wish to engage with the cultural diversity that comes along with cosmopolitanism if/when it is outside of their national context. Their home culture is something they want to protect from diversity, and in wanting to do so the youth in question are asserting clear cultural and/or geographical boundaries to the way they interact with and participate in cosmopolitanism. This may give them a sense of control and that they can opt out of engaging with cultural diversity when it gets 'too much'.

The ways in which the young men here seek to participate in cosmopolitanism is clearly a self-interested form of engagement as the central essence of their narrative is 'I want to enjoy the wider world but cultural Others should not be allowed to do likewise'. This chimes with previous research, such as Power et al.'s (2013) finding that their young respondents' cosmopolitan aspirations and activities were motivated not by selfless idealism but rather by their search for personal self-fulfilment. Frank, Nick and Harry could also be described as engaging in a strategic form of cosmopolitanism, as they are seeking to acquire cultural and economic capital for their own lives, much like in Weenink's (2008) and others' studies. It is also clear that their engagement with cosmopolitan ideas is only partial and seemingly contingent on either the benefits they can accrue for themselves, or perhaps in the case of Harry, the social context in which they are expressing their views (much like Skey (2013) suggests). Nonetheless, the way they talk about their motivations suggests that one can go beyond simply categorising their engagement as contingent, strategic or self-interested. These cases are also notable as cosmopolitanism seems to be conceptualised as a one-way street, and geographical mobility is a practice (or a strategy) that only they (and people like them) should be able to enjoy: that is, 'we' can go out and enjoy freedom of movement, but the immigrant Cultural Other should not be able to have similar freedoms if it involves coming to Britain.

The direction of this one-way street seems to be based on several implicit assumptions. First, Western youth tend to view their own mobility as a temporary phase (Frändberg, 2015) whereas non-Western mobility tends to be perceived as a permanent act of immigration and it is underpinned by (negative) assumptions about the attributes and aspirations of the immigrant Other (Blinder, 2015). For example, many young people in Britain view immigrants as poor, unskilled and a drain on the country's resources (see Keating and Janmaat, 2020). Second, these attitudes also reflect a belief that (White) young people from the Global North should have privileged access to whatever country and culture that they wish to experience, in whatever way they wish to experience it. In

short, individuals leaving from Global North countries are widely imagined to be White, western and middle-class (Benson, 2014; Cheung Judge, 2017; Snee, 2016), while ‘immigrants’ are imagined (and denigrated) as the inverse of this (Blinder, 2015). In the British case, these assumptions are not just rooted in the inequalities of the current world order, but also exacerbated by its colonial past. Colonialism has fostered enduring and deeply ingrained ideas about: ethnic and racial hierarchies; Britain’s technical and cultural superiority; and Britain’s special ability to ‘save’ the world through its engagement with other countries, especially poorer ones (Bhambra, 2017; Garner, 2015). These can be considered a form of imperial nationalism and, as such, might be considered antithetical to cosmopolitanism, but Flemmen and Savage (2017) found that these views were often held by well-educated individuals with cosmopolitan experiences and attitudes. Indeed, Savage et al.’s (2010) work suggests that what we think of as cosmopolitanism is in fact complicit in *maintaining* (rather than challenging) the inequalities that privilege the White, Western and middle/upper-class views of the world. The three cases presented here provide further support for this perspective.

Connections and Intersections with Other Dominant Discourses

The inherent contradiction underpinning these one-way cosmopolitan practices is also connected to other dominant discourses that have come to the fore in Global North societies in recent decades. First, the self-focus of these particular cosmopolitan practices reflects the concurrent rise of individualising discourses that emphasise the importance of individual agency, and the need for young people to focus on the project of the self when constructing their future (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). These discourses have been so powerful and persuasive (see Franceschelli and Keating, 2018; Mendick et al., 2018) it is perhaps no surprise that these narratives have influenced the way cosmopolitan ideas are cherry-picked and co-opted by young people in their ongoing project of the self. Similar arguments have been made about the contradictory discourses that emerge in gap year narratives and how they foster ideas of mobile Westerners consuming cultural difference to support their personal life projects (see Cheung Judge, 2017; Snee, 2016). The link between these discourses is then further compounded by the fact that cosmopolitanism has effectively become a ‘cultural imperative’ for young people (Farrugia, 2020: 239). As a result, contemporary youth in the Global North are exhorted to participate in global mobility as a means to attain a cosmopolitan lifestyle that is not just the most valorised future to aspire to, but also the most valuable for their future. The elitism and inequalities that their mobility opportunities are built on are not given the same prominence (Snee, 2016).

The second key discourse that cosmopolitanism is linked to is, paradoxically, the ‘illiberal turn’ that is seeking to counteract many of the key tenets of cosmopolitanism. This countervailing discourse has been characterised as a backlash to the perceived dominance of cosmopolitanism in politics and policy, and some of its key features are opposition to immigration and multiculturalism (see Norris and Inglehart, 2019). While this backlash is currently associated with recent political events (especially the election of Donald Trump in the USA and the Brexit referendum in Britain) the illiberal turn has been increasingly apparent in political rhetoric, government policy and media debates in

Europe since the early 2000s (Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2010). Thus, while cosmopolitan ideas have dominated public discourse during the formative years of contemporary youth (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Sloam and Henn, 2019), during this same period young people have also borne witness to the 'backlash' against cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. In short, both anti-racist and anti-immigrant norms have been circulating and competing in the public realm during their formative years. As a result, contemporary youth have been exposed to contradictory messages about mobility, migration and multiculturalism. These mixed messages may not only partly explain why the young people described above expressed contradictory attitudes themselves, but also why they were keen to assert their non-racist credentials while simultaneously drawing on discourses that conceptualise immigrants as an economic and/or cultural threat that are using up Britain's scarce social welfare resources and eroding the 'indigenous' culture of their home town or country (Hainmeuller and Hopkins, 2014).

These contradictory attitudes are fuelled by the wider contradictions of contemporary citizenship policies and practices. On the one hand, new equality policies are supposed to ensure that race has no bearing on a citizen's rights and experiences. Yet a proliferation of new citizenship policies has established 'cultural' criteria for citizenship status and belonging that are primarily targeted at non-white minorities and which erase and stigmatise cultural differences (Kapoor, 2013). In short, would-be citizens must now show that they fit in 'culturally' and can assimilate rather than demonstrate their difference (Tonkens and Duyvendak, 2016). In light of this, some have argued that the outcome of this is not a post-racial society, but instead new forms of neoliberal racisms (Kapoor, 2013) and xeno-racisms that function like 'old' racism 'but fail to acknowledge its colour-coded aspect' (Patel and Connelly, 2019: 972). At the very least, the assimilationist impulse of these discourses contradicts the cosmopolitan ideals that are supposed to be so dominant, and further reinforces the mixed messages that young people receive about the desirability of diversity and difference.

Conclusions

The primary aim of this article has been to shed light on the contradictory ways in which some young people engage in cosmopolitan practices and to problematise the popular and academic perceptions of youth cosmopolitanism. To do so, this article takes an in-depth look at the narratives of White British young men who wish to enjoy the mobility benefits of a cosmopolitan lifestyle, but do not wish cultural Others to have the same opportunities to come to live and work in Britain. This, I suggest, should be seen as a one-way form of cosmopolitanism, wherein cultural diversity is acceptable if it is 'out there' in the wider world, but cosmopolitanism should not start at 'home'. This contradiction, I posit, is linked to the mixed messages that young people receive about mobility, migration, multi-culturalism and individualism and to deeply ingrained ideas about the freedom of White westerners to engage with cultural and racial diversity selectively and from a position of power and privilege. Cosmopolitan discourses may have been in the ascendant during the formative period of these youth, but they have also coincided with (and often have been in competition with) powerful discourses that contradict key tenets of the cosmopolitan ideal. In other words, much like their elders, these youth

practices reflect the contradictory discourses that are present in the public sphere, where the openness of cosmopolitanism is circulating alongside increasing individualisation; historical and contemporary ideas about racial and ethnic hierarchies; contradictory citizenship policies that stigmatise ‘cultural’ differences; and, more recently, an explicit backlash against immigration and multiculturalism.

The one-way form of cultural engagement that I focused on here is likely to be a fragile form of cosmopolitanism, but as Skey (2013) points out, it is important to understand even fragile forms of cosmopolitanism, and how cosmopolitan practices can take different forms and can become entangled in (and be co-opted by) the other dominant discourses shaping contemporary social life. Given the age of the participants and the focus of this article, the practices I describe here may be more fragile than other types that emerge at other ages and life-stages. The data presented here focus on aspirations for future mobility, not actual mobility, and what is shown here is only a snapshot of their views at the time the data were collected. The aspirations and attitudes of these young men may have changed in the intervening period – not only because cosmopolitan dispositions themselves are flexible (Skrbis and Woodward, 2007) but also because early adulthood is a formative period in which attitudes and aspirations are malleable and can change considerably (Arnett, 2014). Nonetheless, youth aspirations for the future are still worth studying because they tell us something about how youth *currently* view the world and about what is viewed by society as desirable and undesirable (Skrbis et al., 2014). In this case, then, these particular youth highlight that youth cosmopolitan practices can be complicated, contingent and contradictory, and that for some, cosmopolitan engagement is conceptualised as a one-way street. These contradictions raise questions about the depth of the generational change in attitudes, the optimistic faith placed in future generations and the assumption of linear progression of value change and ‘tolerance’ (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Furthermore, it reminds us that although societies are more inclusive than in the past, exclusionary practices persist, and there is much work still to be done before the cosmopolitan ideals espoused by theorists will be evidenced in practice.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the editors and reviewers for their thought-provoking comments and suggestions, which played a pivotal role in the revisions of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: this research was partially funded by the ESRC (ES/J019135/1) and a UCL-Institute of Education internal research grant.

ORCID iD

Avril Keating  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5021-5048>

References

Arnett JJ (2014) *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Beck U and Beck-Gernsheim E (2002) *Individualization*. London: SAGE.
- Benson M (2014) Negotiating privilege in and through lifestyle migration. In: Benson M and Osbaldiston N (eds) *Understanding Lifestyle Migration*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 47–68.
- Bhambra GK (2017) Locating Brexit in the pragmatics of race, citizenship and empire. In: Outhwaite W (ed.) *Brexit: Sociological Responses*. London: Anthem Press, 91–100.
- Blinder S (2015) Imagined immigration: The impact of different meanings of ‘immigrants’ in public opinion and policy debates in Britain. *Political Studies* 63(1): 80–100.
- Cheung Judge R (2017) Class and global citizenship: Perspectives from non-elite young people’s participation in volunteer tourism. *Tourism Recreation Research* 42(2): 164–175.
- Clarke V, Braun V and Hayfield N (2015) Thematic analysis. In: Smith JA (ed.) *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 222–248.
- Delanty G (2018) Introduction: The field of cosmopolitan studies. In: Delanty G (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies*. Oxford: Routledge, 23–30.
- Farrugia D (2020) Class, place and mobility beyond the global city: Stigmatisation and the cosmopolitanisation of the local. *Journal of Youth Studies* 23(2): 237–251.
- Flemmen M and Savage M (2017) The politics of nationalism and white racism in the UK. *British Journal of Sociology* 68: S233–S264.
- Ford R (2008) Is racial prejudice declining in Britain? *British Journal of Sociology* 59(4): 609–636.
- Franceschelli M and Keating A (2018) Imagining the future in the neoliberal era: Young people’s optimism and their faith in hard work. *Young* 26(4_suppl): 1S–17S.
- Frändberg L (2015) Acceleration or avoidance? The role of temporary moves abroad in the transition to adulthood. *Population, Space and Place* 21(6): 553–567.
- Garner S (2015) *A Moral Economy of Whiteness: Four Frames of Racializing Discourse*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Hainmueller J and Hopkins DJ (2014) Public attitudes toward immigration. *Annual Review of Political Science* 17: 225–249.
- Inglehart R and Welzel C (2005) *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jeffrey C and McFarlane C (2008) Performing cosmopolitanism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26: 420–427.
- Kapoor N (2013) The advancement of racial neoliberalism in Britain. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36(6): 1028–1046.
- Keating A (2016) Are cosmopolitan dispositions learned at home, at school, or through contact with others? Evidence from young people in Europe. *Journal of Youth Studies* 19(3): 338–357.
- Keating A and Janmaat JG (2020) Immigrants, inclusion, and the role of hard work: Exploring anti-immigrant attitudes among young people in Britain. *The Sociological Review* 68(6): 1212–1228.
- Mendick H, Ahmad A, Allen K, et al. (2018) *Celebrity, Aspiration and Contemporary Youth: Education and Inequality in an Era of Austerity*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Mitchell K (2003) Educating the national citizen in neoliberal times: From the multicultural self to the strategic cosmopolitan. *Transactions of the institute of British Geographers* 28(4): 387–403.
- Norris P and Inglehart R (2019) *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Patel TG and Connelly L (2019) ‘Post-race’ racisms in the narratives of ‘Brexit’ voters. *The Sociological Review* 67(5): 968–984.

- Power S, Brown P, Allouch A, et al. (2013) Self, career and nationhood: The contrasting aspirations of British and French elite graduates. *British Journal of Sociology* 64(4): 578–596.
- Savage M, Wright D and Gayo-Cal M (2010) Cosmopolitan nationalism and the cultural reach of the white British. *Nations and Nationalism* 16(4): 598–615.
- Shabi R (2019) How immigration became Britain's most toxic political issue. *Guardian*, 15 November. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/15/how-immigration-became-britains-most-toxic-political-issue>.
- Skey M (2013) What does it mean to be cosmopolitan? An examination of the varying meaningfulness and commensurability of everyday 'cosmopolitan' practices. *Identities* 20(3): 235–252.
- Skey M (2015) 'What nationality he is doesn't matter a damn!': International football, mediated identities and conditional cosmopolitanism. *National Identities* 17(3): 271–287.
- Skrbis Z and Woodward I (2007) The ambivalence of ordinary cosmopolitanism: Investigating the limits of cosmopolitan openness. *The Sociological Review* 55(4): 730–747.
- Skrbis Z, Woodward I and Bean C (2014) Seeds of cosmopolitan future? Young people and their aspirations for future mobility. *Journal of Youth Studies* 17(5): 614–625.
- Sloam J and Henn M (2019) *Youthquake 2017: The Rise of Young Cosmopolitans in Britain*. Switzerland: Springer Nature.
- Snee H (2016) *A Cosmopolitan Journey? Difference, Distinction and Identity Work in Gap Year Travel*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Tonkens E and Duyvendak JW (2016) Introduction: The culturalisation of citizenship. In: Duyvendak JW, Geschiere P and Tonkens E (eds) *The Culturalisation of Citizenship: Belonging and Polarization in a Globalizing World*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–20.
- Vertovec S and Cohen R (2002) *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vertovec S and Wessendorf S (eds) (2010) *The Multiculturalism Backlash: European Discourses, Policies and Practices*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Weenink D (2008) Cosmopolitanism as a form of capital: Parents preparing their children for a globalizing world. *Sociology* 42(6): 1089–1106.
- Woodward I and Skrbis Z (2018) Performing cosmopolitanism. In: Delanty G (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies*. Oxford: Routledge.

Avril Keating is Associate Professor of Comparative Social Science at UCL Institute of Education and the Director of the UCL Centre for Global Youth.

Date submitted January 2021

Date accepted January 2021