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# Talking politics in everyday family lives

Sevasti-Melissa Nolas, Christos Varvantakis and Vinnarasan Aruldoss

University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

**ABSTRACT**

How do children encounter and relate to public life? Drawing on evidence from ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2016 for the ERC-funded Connectors Study on the relationship between childhood and public life, this paper explores how children encounter public life in their everyday family environments. Using the instance of political talk as a practice through which public life is encountered in the home, the data presented fill important gaps in knowledge about the lived experience of political talk of younger children. Working with three family histories where political talk was reported by parents to be a practice encountered in their own childhoods and one which they continued in the present amongst themselves as a couple/parents, we make two arguments: that children's political talk, where it occurs, is idiomatic and performative; and that what is transmitted across generations is the practice of *talking* politics. Drawing on theories of everyday life developed by Michel de Certeau and others we explore the implications of these findings for the dominant social imaginaries of conversation, and for how political talk is researched.

## Introduction

The paper addresses the ERC-funded *Connectors Study*'s concern with the relationship between childhood and public life, and how an orientation towards social action emerges (or not) in childhoods that are located in different national cultural contexts, over time, and during a historical moment of global economic precarity (Nolas, 2015; Nolas, Varvantakis, & Aruldoss, 2016). The analysis draws on three family histories composed through longitudinal ethnographic research carried out between 2014 and 2016 with families living in Athens (Greece), Hyderabad (India), and London (England). We focus on the phenomenon of political talk as that is encountered across generations (families of origin, current families). Political talk has been defined as 'a specific type of social interaction, [which] manifests itself in the form of discrete events where two or more people engage in exchanges of meaning with reference to politics' (Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013, p. 514), and as 'conversations about public concerns that take place in private, semi-public, and public settings … and have an informal and spontaneous

character, in contrast to formally arranged and goal-orientated discussions and deliberation' (Ekström, 2016, p. 1). We argue that these three families, in which parents reported growing up with political talk as part of the discursive repertoires of their families of origin and in which we observed the children, aged between 5 and 7 years, experimenting with political talk, provide an opportunity to explore the much understudied 'phenomenology of political talk' (Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013) at the same time as raising questions about what aspects of political talk are transmitted intergenerationally.

Responses to the question of how children encounter public life and with what consequences have preoccupied political scientists, sociologists, and psychologists since the 1950s (Almond & Verba, 1963; Hyman, 1959; Niemi & Sobieszek, 1977). In line with trends across the social sciences, and because of the close relationship between political science and psychology, the early study of political socialisation focused on the learning and transmission of political knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours where such knowledge and attitudes were often narrowly confined to matters of government, elections, and other legislative procedures (see Sapiro, 2004 for an excellent review). At the same time, the role of early experience itself in the formation of politically knowledgeable, politically partisan, and politically active subjects was, and continues to be, contested (Dinas, 2013; Marsh, 1971; Niemi & Hepburn, 1995).

Underpinning these studies were behavioural models of socialisation (e.g. social learning theory) in which children, our main focus here, were conceived as passive recipients of adult, expert knowledge. As Moran-Ellis and Sünker (2008) argue, the longstanding dominance of developmental psychology, functionalist sociology, and education in studying childhood in the twentieth century resulted in an emphasis on questions concerning what children would *become* as adults, how that becoming would happen in order for children to take up pre-assigned roles, and how adults might intervene in children's lives to ensure the 'right' trajectories were in place for those roles to be attained. While the 'preparatory view' of childhood has stood alongside more agentic views of children held in anthropology (Hardman, 1973), social psychology (Mead, 1934), and psychoanalysis (Freud, 1966), it was not until the arrival of the sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1990) on the one hand, and socio-legal changes on the other (e.g. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), that views of children's agency and capabilities in socio-cultural reproduction started to be mainstreamed.

As disciplinary spaces for the study of political socialisation start to be permeated by scholars from outside the political science and psychology nexus, social imaginaries of the child have begun shifting. In particular, the introduction of a communicative research paradigm where talk is foregrounded marks a break with the aforementioned passive view of the child in the study of political socialisation (Buckingham, 1999; McDevitt & Chaffee, 2002; Ojeda & Hatemi, 2015; Sapiro, 2004). For instance, McDevitt and Chaffee's (2002) family study of primary school children in California finds that children are co-creators of family communication and political talk, a finding that is further corroborated by George (2013) who focuses on the linguistic strategies that Californian children use in order to draw their parents into political conversations. The importance of political talk is also encountered in the findings of longitudinal cohort studies which suggest that political talk mediates the transmission of civic practices across the life course (Pancer, 2015). As such, the study of political talk has been pursued as a route to understanding children's political socialisation, the latter understood as interpretative reproduction (Corsaro, 1992)

in which 'children are not only acted on by adults but [are] also agents of political change and cultural interpretation and change' (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007).

The research presented in this paper joins existing communicative research in understanding children as active meaning makers and participants in intergenerational political talk. It contributes to the identified lack of knowledge in the phenomenology of political talk (Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013) and extends current understandings in two significant ways. Using ethnographic data with children, further contextualised through parental biographical interviews, we make the case that the phenomenology of political talk in childhood is largely idiomatic and performative. At the same time, we argue that what is transmitted across generations is not so much political talk, a noun which suggests the transmission of substantive political knowledge and values, as it is the practice of *talking* politics, as a verb, a collaborative activity between generations. These findings have implications for reconfiguring the social imaginaries of political talk and its transmission, imaginaries which are often unwittingly reproduced in research methodologies that focus exclusively on interviews and focus groups. We address these issues in the discussion section of the paper.

## Encountering political talk

The Connectors Study takes place in two European cities (Athens and London) and one Indian city (Hyderabad). These cities were originally chosen for the different narratives of economic boom and bust that they afforded, and the extent to which their different economic fortunes offered a historical moment in which to think about the relationship between childhood and public life, and an emergence (or not) of social action in childhood. One aim of the study is to extend the evidence base beyond the typical North American and Northern European contexts which underpin a large part of the literature on children's and young people's participation in public life, and to engage in cross-cultural and cross-national conversations in understanding the meanings and practices at the intersections of childhood, activism, and public life. A second aim of the study is to create theory from the bottom up on the relationship between childhood and public life.

To this extent, we did not start the research anticipating to focus on political talk, and indeed the formulation of exploring 'the relationship between childhood and public life' was purposely broad in order to enable a sociological imagination to take root and unfold. In this sense, the emergence of political talk as a fruitful line of inquiry may be likened to the walking practice of creating *desire lines* across urban and rural landscapes. A desire path is the consequence of landscape erosion as walkers veer off the beaten path creating new transit lines across the city and the field. De Certeau (1984) has argued for the link between 'the chorus of idle footsteps' found across the city and the acts of speaking and writing, arguing that 'turns of phrase' can be likened to composing a path (p. 100). Given the study's aims of re-theorising children's participation, the instance of political talk in family life enables us to compose a first path through a large, multimodal data set and to enunciate one of a number of instances in which children may encounter public life.

The family is a highly suitable context for the study of political talk. Survey and interview research on political talk suggests that trust and intimacy, often found in close family and friendship relationships, are necessary for political talk to emerge between people

(Bennett, Flickinger, & Rhine, 2000). Some research suggests that young people find political talk desirable but also dangerous and risky, and so will sometimes avoid it (Ekström, 2016). Where children and young people engage in political talk with significant others they often take an active role in initiating conversations about politics while parents differ in the degree to which they respond and engage with their children's questions (George, 2013). This suggests that children's questions may require parents to educate themselves in order to reply with confidence. The frequency of political talk in everyday life also varies according to levels of confidence and knowledge (Bennett et al., 2000), as well as varying cross-nationally (Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013). As such, according to the existing knowledge base, political talk, despite being about highly public issues, appears to be a very private social interaction practiced in the safety of the home and/ or the comfort of known and trusted significant others.

The literature on children's encounters with public life, variously described as children's participation and political socialisation, while espousing a perspective of children as active meaning makers has been slow to embrace the idea that younger children are participants of political and cultural change. It is more typical, and historically has been the case (Niemi & Hepburn, 1995), that adolescence is seen as a key moment in the life course for studying young people's political encounters. Yet, as Sapiro (2004) convincingly argues, political and social scientists, we would add, should abandon childhood at their peril. Established literature on identity and social categorisation demonstrate unequivocally that younger children (5–6 years) display the tendencies to respond politically to the world around them as they navigate social-group categories and identities of gender, race, and ethnicity (Bennett & Sani, 2003 cited in Sapiro, 2004; Lloyd & Duveen, 1990), as well as the inequalities and injustices that such differences often entail. At the same time biographies and autobiographies of people who have been civically and politically active, committed to publicly engaging with issues of common concern during their lifetime, suggest that encounters with public life can and do happen early (Andrews, 1997; Nolas et al., 2016). As such, in the Connectors Study we recruited children who were between 5 and 8 years old at the time of joining the study.

A total of 45 children (split more or less equally in terms of gender), and their families, took part in the study. The within-city and between-cities sample captured socio-economic, class, religious, racial, ethnic, and political diversities as relevant to each city. The research also engaged children whose families bring a diversity of experiences to the study in terms of family composition, parental levels of education, parental occupational groups, employment status, parental civic/political engagement, and city geography.

The sub-sample of three ethnographic family histories analysed for this paper was selected for two reasons. Firstly, we observed children experimenting with political talk during our fieldwork which was unprompted by us. Secondly, during parental interviews, when asked, their parents reported that they had grown up with political talk in their families of origin and continued to talk politics with their partner and significant others in the family. As such, political talk was part of family communicative repertoires across generations offering an opportunity to study the phenomenology of political talk as that related to children (a key focus on the study) and to raise questions about what is transmitted across generations (a key theme in the political socialisation literature).

The three families we draw on have a number of commonalities despite their geographical and national-cultural differences. They are all middle class and professional

families where both parents work (with one exception). The parents are educated to degree or post-graduate level and there is one advanced degree (PhD) holder in each of the families. All three sets of parents identified as aligned to a greater or lesser extent with progressive politics, and parents demonstrated a high degree of confidence in talking about politics and social issues. In terms of family dynamics participant observation suggested that authoritative and democratic parenting styles were employed by the parents. In this respect, these families can be described as embodying something of the Habermasian ideal of communicative action as a means to negotiate and make family decisions, and of high awareness, and at times direct engagement, with issues of a social and political nature and concern. Other families in the study also fit these broad descriptions but did not indicate a continuity in political talk. We return to this observation in the discussion.

At the same time, there were a number of differences amongst the families which are significant and worth noting. For the family in Athens, it is important to understand that while both parents were politically active in their youth (rally attendances, party memberships), identifying with extreme left groups and political parties, each parent responded to the present historical moment and political situation in Greece differently. Having voted for the current government, 18 months into their administration, Ioulia,[1] the mother, barely concealed her disappointment and anger describing the government as 'traitors'. Conversely Nikos, the father, trying not to be overly pessimistic, would often in conversation identify the positive aspects in the government's policies. For the family in Hyderabad, both parents, Vijaya and Kailash, were actively involved in the separatist Telangana movement which in 2015 resulted in the split of the State of Andhra Pradesh into Andhra Pradesh and the new Indian state of Telangana. The parents described themselves as having been ideologically attracted to each other in their youth, with their partnership itself considered a highly political union in so far as they came from different castes and married against their parents' wishes and prevalent social norms. Vijaya and Kailash regularly organised and attended political gatherings and/or held gatherings in their home which took place in earshot of their daughter, Asha. Finally, the family in London is a European migrant family. Alessandra is from Italy and Manolis is from Greece, although Alessandra grew up in London. In Manolis's family of origin there is a tradition of involvement in local politics. His father was the mayor of the small town the family lived in when Manolis was growing up. Alessandra has been involved in community-related matters such as setting up an Italian speaking playgroup and lobbying the local MP to visit her son's school as a way of bolstering the school's fragile reputation.

Multimodal ethnography (Dicks, Soyinka, & Coffey, 2006) was used in developing the family histories. As well as participant-observation in everyday family life which happened through seven documented visits to each family over an 18-month period, a range of methods were also used to find out more about children's life worlds: playing (introduced by the children in the study), photography, neighbourhood tours and drawing of maps, mapping of significant relationships, biographical interviews (children and parents), and a children's creative workshops. The initial ethnographic fieldwork with children and their families took place between October 2014 and May 2016. Previous research suggests that political talk in everyday life is largely elusive (Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013) making it hard to document through participant observation. Our study joins a small number of ethnographic studies on the topic (Eliasoph, 1998; George, 2013) and in the discussion, we will

return to the possibilities and limitations of using ethnographic methods in the study of political talk.

## The phenomenology of political talk

Taking up the challenge to shed light on 'the phenomenology of political talk', we draw on an assemblage of cultural theories that focus on peoples' lived experiences and the social practices that emerge in and through everyday day times and spaces. In this paper, we mobilise the interdisciplinary thinking of De Certeau (1984; De Certeau, Giard, & Mayol, 1996) and Seremetakis (1994) whose combined scholarship draws on an impressive and international range of sources to build a picture of everyday life that is both familiar and strange, reproduced at the same time as it is also altered and evaded, and in which meaning is sedimented in objects, gestures, and memories. Here the everyday is both the repository of age-old wisdom, as well as the location of inventiveness. Both approaches are much less cultural *theory*, as they are epistemological approaches for engaging with the rich and messy tapestry of the ordinary through close, empirically driven analysis of everyday life and its narrative production (Nolas, 2014).

In particular, we draw on what in French de Certeau calls *récits*. In French, *récits* refers to a short piece of writing, with just one storyline, real or fictitious, and as a verb (réciter) connotes the telling of a story that relates to the teller alone (e.g. 'le récit de mes vacances', 'le récit de mon enfance').[2] The word *récits* has been translated into English as stories. In Greek, its meaning encompasses the Greek words *μύθος* (mythos/myth) and the polysemous word *ιστορία* (istoria) meaning both story and history (Herzfeld, 1991). In several other European languages, the translation of *récits* (German: erzählung; Danish: fortælling) also connotes a relation(ship); while in Telugu the translation is closer to the English stories as well as being used to mean tall tales and excuses.[3] What this means is that *récits* are not just the recounting of a real or imagined event, as the English definition of a story suggests. Instead *récits* are carriers of past and present public and private selves, of history and biography, and of the self's relationships across time.

In this section, we present three such *récits* as each researcher/author encountered them in the field. The *récits* were chosen for their illustrative power of how children encounter, make sense of, and reproduce political talk in their everyday family spaces and times. These are not the only forms of political expression encountered in the fieldwork, but in line with previous research on the topic they are the most recognisable as 'political talk' at the same time as they subvert the very category of political talk through their particular and distinctive 'turns of phrase' (De Certeau, 1984).

### *'I don't believe that the Bermuda triangle is a gateway to other dimensions'*

We start our journey in Athens with brothers Alexandros, aged 7, and Yiannis, aged 5, who live in a middle class suburb in the southeastern region of the Attica basin. Alexandros has a profound interest in mathematics and physics, as well as aspirations of becoming an inventor – when he talks about his microscope his eyes light up. Yannis, his younger brother writes stories and aspires to be an author. Both brothers dislike doing their

homework, and their preferred pastime, of watching cartoons and playing videogames, is the source of endless family negotiations in which Alexandros emerges as a skilled negotiator.

During the fourth visit to the family home, Christos found himself present during a political discussion between Alexandros and his brother. At the time of the research in Greece, Syriza, a left-wing party had been in government for about nine months. Following the June 2015 referendum result and the outcome of the negotiations with the IMF and Eurozone for a bailout deal, Syriza called for a new election to be held, in which the party ran on a more centrist agenda.

The conversation below started off with a discussion about family routines which were to be interrupted by the forthcoming elections. The mention of elections offered the siblings an opportunity to extensively discuss the current political scene in Greece. The siblings refract current affairs through religious, scientific, fantasy, and historical discourses as a way of navigating the political, raising ethical questions, and creating a moral order. Their analysis also departs considerably from what 'mama said' suggesting the potential for agency in making sense of politics:

| | |
|---|---|
| **Alexandros**: | There were riots downtown? Yesterday or a few days ago? [He asked the researcher]. |
| **Yannis**: | Yes, because Tsipras quitted. |
| **Alexandros**: | They quited him, he didn't quit. |
| **Yannis**: | Yes, they did, because he started becoming like Samaras. |
| **Alexandros**: | No, that's lies. |
| **Yannis**: | Yes, mama said so too. |
| **Alexandros**: | No, he tried to give money to the people. |
| **Yannis**: | Yes, he did. He is just. I believe he will go to Heaven when he dies |
| **Alexandros**: | Hitler, certainly went to hell. But I don't believe in Hell and in Heaven. And neither do I believe in God, and not in Adam and Eve. |
| **Yannis**: | I think there is Heaven. |
| **Alexandros**: | If there are aliens, why should God be only in our planet? And why in our dimension only, since there are more dimensions? I believe there are more dimensions, but I don't believe that the Bermuda triangle is a gateway to other dimensions. |
| **Yannis**: | I don't believe that too. |
| **Alexandros**: | But there are flying saucers. [he smiled] Tiny, super tiny alien flying saucers: Viruses! |
| **Yannis**: | There are no Aliens, and the infinite is in fact finite! |
| **Alexandros**: | Yes, universe is just a huge milky way, that has an end. |
| **Yannis**: | But, I believe in Jesus, I just don't believe that he was the son of God. |
| **Alexandros**: | He was a man. |
| **Yannis**: | And he will not return on earth. He was just a man who did extraordinary good deeds. |
| **Alexandros**: | He wasn't that good, this is a myth, he was as good as other men are. He was probably fair (δίκαιος/just). But other men are fair, and brave. Kolokotronis was brave, he did good deeds … Tsipras is fair too. Samaras is not fair, he gives most of the money to the Germans and to the rich guys. |
| **Yannis**: | It would be fair [Samaras] to die, I could kill him. |
| **Alexandros**: | No, it wouldn't be fair. |
| **Yannis**: | No. |
| **Alexandros**: | And Germany must take back all the money we owe them. But we don't owe them that much as they say we do! |
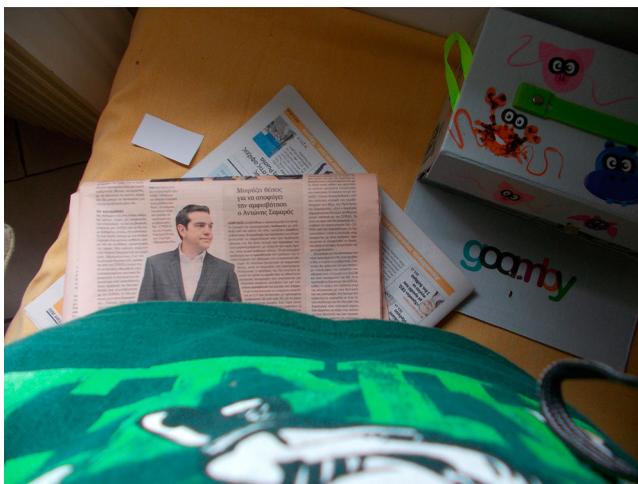
**Figure 1.** Photograph taken by Alexandros (6 June 2015) as part of the visual methods brief of taking pictures of 'things that matter to me'.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Yannis**: | In the referendum, everybody voted No, which meant to not pay the Germans. But nothing happened, and the money [in Greece] didn't finish [run out] after all. |
| **Alexandros**: | No country can go bankrupt, ever. Because all the money are circulated in all countries. Except Africa. (Dialogue reconstructed from fieldnotes, Athens, 18 September 2015) |

The issues raised by this exchange capture a number of ongoing preoccupations for Alexandros and Yannis, who regularly try to make sense of social inequalities as they encounter these in their environment. For example, Alexandros often talks to Christos about money with a sophisticated understanding of the economic dimensions of consumption, production, exchange, and capital. Similarly, the imaginary aspects, the metaphysical concerns, the economy, and the modern-day politics are all themes that surfaced and re-surfaced in Christos's discussions with the two brothers (Figure 1). Discussions around these issues are quite characteristic of the talk within this family, as Christos has experienced it. Finally, as previously mentioned, Alexandros's and Nikos's parents hold different views about the current political situation. As such, the family discursive repertoires vis-à-vis current political realities could be described as oscillating between hope and despair (Hoggett & Randall, 2016). This oscillation is reflected in the boys' dialogue as they improvise off each other never quite settling on one position or another.

### 'Kondalu Pagalesinaam'/'we break the hills'

The next récit comes from Asha, aged 6, who lives on one of Hyderabad's university campuses with her parents. Asha likes outdoor play, and regularly watches cartoon programmes. She is passionate about drawing and likes to watch films on television. Her parents, in line with contemporary popular beliefs about the negative relationship between screen time and childhood, discourage her from doing so. Asha is inspired by

her father to write Telugu poems and, at one point during the fieldwork, wrote a four-line poem for Vinnarasan and our local researcher Madhavi Latha, entitled 'Peacock'. She aspires to become an Indian Administrative Officer, a top ranking civil servant in order to serve people, an echo of an earlier dream her father harboured for himself.

Data collection took place following the May 2014 elections in which the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept to power nationally, and the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) regional political party, which spearheaded the Telangana Movement for more than a decade, formed the maiden government in Telangana.

During visits to the family, Vinnarasan often heard political discussions take place between Asha's father and visitors, many within earshot of Asha. During the first visit to the family, Asha wanted to accompany her father to a school function where he was invited to give a talk. Discussing other times when she had accompanied her father to public events, Asha recounted her recent attendance at a meeting to commemorate the anniversary of Indian social reformer B. R. Ambedkar's birth during which the organisers screened a documentary about his life. Asha informed Vinnarasan that she has also watched on-campus screenings of documentaries on revolutionaries Bhagat Singh and Che Guevara, noting that she was the only child in the room. During another field visit, Asha tells Vinnarasan that she likes accompanying her parents to meetings because she can play in a different place, and besides the food is always good.

In the fourth field visit to the family, Asha wanted to share with the researchers her experiences of revolutionary songs encountered at a political event she had attended. She explained to the researchers that she had accompanied her parents to a political event in the auditorium during where she sang a particular song which she then, without much encouragement, went on to perform for the researchers:

| | |
|---|---|
| **Vinnarsan**: | How do you know the song, whose choice is that? |
| **Asha**: | Nana (father), he taught us the song. |
| **Madhavi**: | Do you still remember the entire song? |
| **Asha**: | Yes! Asha responds and begins singing the song that starts with *kondalu pagalesinaam/we break the hills* … . When she's finished Vinnarasan asks her; |
| **Vinnarsan**: | Do you know the meaning of the song? |
| **Asha**: | No, I just by-heart the song. |
| **Madhavi**: | What was the response you got after singing the song? |
| **Asha**: | They clapped. |
| **Vinnarsan**: | Do you know or understand what people [adults] spoke on that day in the meeting? |
| **Asha**: | Hu hum [meaning no]. I have seen some banners in Telugu but I don't know what they are for. [She said she can read Telugu but she is not good at it as English is the first language in her school]. (Dialogue reconstructed from fieldnotes, 7 November 2015). |

*Kondalu pagalesinaam/we break the hills* is a song about worker's plight that talks about the lived experiences of toiling the land, the labour of production, and the eventual revolution. The song was composed by Gummadi Vittal Rao, popularly known as 'Gaddar', a revolutionary poet singer who emerged as a powerful and popular cultural icon of post-independence India. Gaddar's songs express the struggles of Indian society, and especially of Telugu society. The song has four stanzas and Asha sings the complete song without fumbling. In recounting where she encountered the song, Asha was specific about the date of

the meeting and her demeanour with the researchers communicated elation about her experiences on that day and her ability to perform *Kondalu pagalesinaam* for them.

### A game of voting: 'maybe my dad couldn't live in the United States'

Finally, in a north London neighbourhood on a broad, tree-lined street with terraced housing we meet Alessio, aged 6. Alessio is fascinated by videogames and takes an active interest in the word around him. He also takes a keen interest in the study and from the outset asked Melissa many pertinent and probing questions that scrutinised the study design and his involvement.

The fieldwork described below takes place a month after the 7 May 2015 General Election in the United Kingdom that dissolved the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government which had been in power from May 2010, giving way to an outright, and unexpected, Conservative majority. Asked about national or international news that has resonated over the last 12 months at the time of the biographical interviews (March 2016), both parents talked at length about being moved by the refugee crisis, and financially supporting relief organisations, as well as exploring their concerns about the upcoming referendum on the UK's EU membership.

During the second visit to the family, Melissa spent the day with Alessio which included going to Italian school with him and then to a children's play in the afternoon. After lunch, and as they waited to leave the house for the theatre, Alessio invents a game which makes little sense at the time. Alessio explains that this is a made-up game of 'voting'. He takes the scrabble pieces and throws them up in the air. Once they have landed he selects the ones that are either face up or face down (this changes each time) and tells Melissa they are 'candidates'. The game goes on for a good 20 minutes in which scrabble pieces are tossed up in the air, sorted, and tossed up again, until there is only one piece left. Melissa remembers watching from the sidelines in bemusement, taking a few photographs, and reflecting on her ineptitude at making sense of what she was observing:

> After we've played noughts and crosses a number of times Alessio wanders over to the box of toys as if looking for something else to play. He takes out a banana pouch containing lots of



**Figure 2.** Photograph taken by Sevasti-Melissa Nolas of Alessio playing his 'voting game'.

scrabble pieces. We play a made-up game of 'voting' using the scrabble tiles. We had to throw them up in the air, the ones that landed face up/letter up could be 'candidates'. In the end, we took all the tiles and put them in two long lines. Alessio walked between the tiles and those tiles that didn't get disrupted could be voted for. In the end the letter A tile won. I didn't quite understand this game, other than it's fun to throw tiles in the air and to separate and sort tiles. I recognise this as a 'homegrown' game a bit like Eleanor's [another child in the study] button game. I also thought it was interesting that Alessio called it a voting game, though not sure I could draw any significance from that at this point. (fieldnotes, London, 6 June 2015) (Figure 2)

Nine months later in March 2016, Melissa interviews Alessio. During the interview, she asks him if there is anything that has happened recently that he considers to be unfair. Alessio starts to talk about the UK referendum on EU membership. He worries that his father, who does not hold a British passport, may not be allowed to stay in the country, 'Maybe Daddy, my Dad would not live in the United States. You know that voting thing?' (child biographical interview, London, 21 March 2016). Brexit is a recurrent topic of conversation in the family, and a topic that was discussed at length in both parental interviews. Manolis had told Melissa that he had spent some time explaining Brexit to Alessio in 'how do you say, a neutral way' and that 'as usual, as Alessio does, he doesn't answer anything, he takes it and then he comes to me after a couple of weeks. He always does that' (father biographical interview, 3 March 2016). While Alessio's comments contain inaccuracies (e.g. USA instead of UK) the exchange mirrors a number of public debates and concerns pre- and post-referendum regarding European citizens' right to remain in the UK and the freedom of movement of people across Europe.

## Talking politics in everyday family lives

Our encounters above echo findings in the emerging body of qualitative literature cited earlier that suggests that children can be initiators of political talk. As Nikos, Alexandros's father, also observes: 'of course, they ask, it makes sense, if they ask you have to respond' (Nikos, biographical interview, Athens). At the same time, children's political talk, at least in the ways we encountered it, brings something of the uncanny (Highmore, 2002) into our understanding of how talking politics happens in everyday family life. Our experience was that children's 'political talk' was largely idiomatic and did not, on first hearing, conform to received notions of the political even when children were talking about institutional politics as in the examples above.

In both the Athens and London excerpts, we find current events refracted through other familiar *récits* and everyday objects. A host of deeply gendered and racialised human, non-human, and abstract characters (God, Adam and Eve, Kolokotronis, Samaras, Jesus, Tsipras, the Germans, aliens, Africa) are mobilised as part of a series of complex plotlines (morality, religion, cosmology, and nationalism) and complicating actions (Bermuda triangle, riots, death, voting) with everyday objects (scrabble pieces) deployed as props. It took several months to start to imagine Alessio's scrabble voting game as a meaningful activity. In Hyderabad, by contrast, we find that Asha's performance of a political song taps into 'cultures of memories' (Rao, 2014) that bring together regional and political traditions of cultural transmission (Kaplan & Shapiro, 1998; Muthukumaraswamy & Kaushal, 2004; Seymour, 2006). In embracing both the ordinary and the

strange, children's practices of talking politics serve to de-familiarise our social imaginaries of political talk and to introduce an everyday aesthetic (Highmore, 2002) into our understanding of talking politics in family life. As de Certeau argues, narration (*réciter)* by way of the past and by way of quotation, provides a detour that serves to disrupt established ways of knowing and doing. All *récits* presented served to disrupt children's everyday activities (playing, talking, waiting) as well as disrupting scholarly ideas of political socialisation in which reproduction happens without mediation and change, and in which conversation is orderly.

Social imaginaries of communication in general and political talk in particular continue to rest on an idealised and exclusive notion of conversation as carried out in cafes and parlours, amongst seated adult men engaged in turn-taking conversation (cf. Habermas, 1981/1984). Children's political talk jolts such imaginaries enmeshed as it is in other activities, occurring as it does without prelude or postscript, and embedded as it is in motion and commotion. For example, one should not imagine the exchange between Alexandros and Nikos as taking place between two seated and perfectly concentrated-in-the-act-of-dialogue children. The brothers were entirely mobile throughout the duration of the short exchange. Alexandros was playing with the head of a Lego figure as he was talking and Yannis was walking along the back of the sofa, a tight rope walker in the middle of a balancing act. The exchange was preceded by play, and gradually dissolved into play once again. In Hyderabad, Asha burst into song largely unprompted by the researchers. The performance took place in the middle of a conversation where Vinnarasan and Madhavi had been asking Asha about changes in her life since they had last seen her five months previously. The researchers and Asha had been sitting on a wooden sofa for the interview, when Asha stood up with gusto, and performed the song. Finally, a child's constant sweeping movements across the living room floor as he roamed the perimeter of the carpet sorting and collecting scrabble pieces that were repeatedly tossed up in the air and fell undeterred to the floor punctuated Alessio's rendition of talking politics.

Parental interviews and our own participant observation further develop a sensory appreciation of the times and places of political talk within everyday family life. The London excerpt of Alessio playing voting-scrabble took place on a Saturday afternoon, post-lunch, and in-between organised activities, Italian school in the morning and a visit to a children's theatre performance in the afternoon. It suggests that spaces in which children might talk politics are largely unstructured, and lurk on the edge of adult activities: Alessio's parents were sorting the clean laundry as he played. At the same time, all three sets of parents, in their separate interviews, invoked more communal family spaces and times, such as the kitchen table and meal times, in their descriptions of political talk in their families of origin and in their current families. Their descriptions of political talk reinforced the idea, also captured by survey research, that political talk emerges in intimate, safe, everyday informal environments. Here the phenomenology of political talk differs for parents and children but is not unrelated. While adults may be sitting around a table 'talking in very loud voices with their friends over dinner about politics' (Alessandra, London), children might on occasions 'be sitting along with us' (Kailash, Hyderabad) or 'they've eaten, they're watching TV' in the background while parents 'end up talking politics' (Ioulia, Athens).[4] Such overlapping adult-child spaces give children the opportunity to both tune-in and tune-out of political talk as necessary and in response to their own playful activities.

These observations about the phenomenology of talking politics in everyday life lead us to suggest that what is transmitted across generations is not necessarily the substance of political talk as much as it is its practice. In her biographical interview, Ioulia describes at length how she would have 'clashes' with her own father as a teenager over their opposing political views. But the term 'clashes' did not carry a negative connotation for her. Instead it was a valued conversational (discursive) practice which she continued in her own family. Similarly, Kailash talks about the intertwining of family and regional histories of involvement in the labour movement which he credits for his own biographical 'habit of participating' (Kailash, biographical interview, Hyderabad) in progressive social change (cf. Andrews, this issue; Pedwell, 2017).

In particular, through the exploration of the phenomenology of political talk we start to see a sonic landscape of multiple and overlapping past and present voices (grandparents, parents, children, the television, researchers) in which talking politics might unfold in everyday life. The practice of talking politics is mediated by both the mundane and ordinary (playing on a Saturday afternoon), as well as by other family practices of communion and commensality. Of eating together, Giard (1996) and Seremetakis (1994) have both argued that sensory acculturation and the materialisation of historical consciousness occur through the preparation and consumption of food in families. Enmeshed as talking politics is in these practices of remembering and feeling together, political talk is not just a way of encountering public life in the private sphere. Evoking the full multilingual meaning of Michel de Certeau's term *récit*, it is also a way of relating and of creating relationships (Ekström, 2016) between past and present selves, current interlocutors, orators, and audiences.

## Conclusion

The paper has theorised encounters between childhood and public life through the phenomenon of talking politics in family life. We have argued for a view of political talk as a social practice that is embedded in everyday times and spaces and in which meaning is sedimented in objects, gestures, and memories. In this sense, children's political socialisation, to use the language of the political science literature, and the transmission of political cultures across generations is an embodied, sensory experience mediated by particular *récits* that are both familiar and strange, in which biography and history become sedimented at the same time as the telling of stories disrupts taken for granted meanings (De Certeau, 1984).

The analysis has implications for how we understand continuity and change in practices (Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012) of talking politics across generations. It has been argued that theories of childhood are overly reliant on cognitive, conceptual, and rational models of an idealised form of communication that ignores the everyday, embodied, and lived experiences of 'sentiment devices' (Oswell, 2012), or idioms, of childhood. In this paper, we have engaged with childhood idioms as those relate to talking politics and with the absurdist, imaginative, playful, and repetitive social interaction that the children shared with us.

These ethnographically generated observations have implications for future research on talking politics in family life and other social milieus characterised by high degrees of trust (e.g. close and old friendships). The data, and their analysis, trouble the ways in which 'political talk' has been imagined and reproduced in research studies to date

(Bhavnani, 1990; Ekström, 2016; Stevens, 1982). Idealised social imaginaries of political talk and its transmission are unwittingly reproduced in research methodologies that focus exclusively on interviews and focus groups. Future research will need to think creatively about the possibilities of spending time and building trusting relationships with interlocutors, young and old, in the field. It is our experience that such investment, while resource intensive, pays off empirically in generating rich data that takes us beyond the idea of political conversation, especially in childhood, as a sit-down, turn taking, quiet and polite activity.

Finally, it is worth remembering that this paper only focused on a small number of families who reported continuity of talking politics across generations, and whose initial definitions of politics aligned with an institutional understanding of the political. Further analysis will explore discontinuities in the practices of talking politics across generations as well as inventions of traditions of talking politics where those were not experienced in families of origin – both further patterns in the overall sample. Equally, subsequent analysis will also need to explore the full breadth of the meaning of the political in families' everyday lives, what matters to children and parents and their relationships of concern to the world (Sayer, 2010), and how differences in socio-economic experiences intersect with children's experiences of encountering public life in everyday familial contexts.

## Notes

1. All names appearing in this manuscript are pseudonyms.
2. Holiday stories, childhood stories; with thanks to Louisa Zanoun for the semantic clarifications.
3. With thanks to Madhavi Latha for her assistance with this translation.
4. All quoted texts are from parental biographical interviews.

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## Notes on contributors

*Sevasti-Melissa Nolas* is a critical social psychologist, the Principal Investigator of the ERC-funded Connectors Study, and a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Sussex. Her research areas include: childhood publics, children participation, youth development, women and children's experiences of family violence, civic and political practices across the life course, and publics creating methodologies. She has published widely on these topics. You can read more about the ERC Connectors Study here: https://connectorsstudy.wordpress.com.

*Christos Varvantakis* is an anthropologist, currently working at the University of Sussex, carrying out research in Athens for the ERC-funded Connectors Study. He completed his PhD at the Freie Universität Berlin and he has undertaken research in Germany, South India and Greece. His research areas are currently: childhood, politics, urban environments and visual research methodologies. He has published on politics around urban public space, on childhood and politics, on media and youth activism, and on the theory and history of visual anthropology.

*Vinnarasan Aruldoss* is a research fellow at the University of Sussex working on the ECR-funded Connectors Study in India. He completed his PhD in Social Policy at the University of Edinburgh looking at early childhood education and children's everyday experiences in three different pedagogical settings in Tamil Nadu in South India. He has published papers on early childhood policy, creative learning spaces, children's participation in early years, and childhood and politics.

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