

## **A Psychosocial Study of Political Followership: The Case of the Young Corbynites**

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### **Introduction**

Political leadership has a long history of being studied as a topic in its own right (Byman et al, 2013; Stein, 2016) and yet political followership and its emotional dynamics remains relatively under-researched within psycho-political studies (Bligh, 2011; Carsten et al., 2014; Popper, 2014).<sup>2</sup> From a psychosocial perspective, leadership and followership are interlinked through the psychological mechanisms of fantasy, identification and the affective ties between leader and follower which have their roots in early childhood. In this article, we present a psychosocial approach to political followership that combines political sociology with relational psychoanalysis<sup>3</sup> to examine the unconscious feelings and fantasies that are stirred up in relation to the current UK Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn as an object of the psycho-political imagination. In particular, we focus on his appeal for young political followers during the period in 2015-16 when he was first elected as the party leader. Aged between 18-24 years and known as ‘Millennials’ or ‘Generation Y’, that grouping was, along with 25-39 year olds, the strongest supporters of Corbyn when he was first elected as Leader in 2015 (YouGov, 2015). Aided by the introduction of cheap membership fees, his popularity with Generation Y continued in 2016 with a stark rise in membership in university cities and towns across the UK

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<sup>2</sup> Following a political leader has been defined as ‘the behaviors one engages in while interacting with leaders in an effort to meet organizational objectives.’ (Carsten et al., 2014 p.14).

<sup>3</sup> Relational psychoanalysis is a broad term first used by US psychoanalyst Stephen Mitchell (1988) to refer to the psychoanalytic understanding of the relationships between objects both in the external world and in the inner world and the importance of those relationships for the psychic health of the individual and for society more widely.

(MacAskill, 2016) and it is that grouping of Corbyn followers that we address as a case study in the course of this article.

At a time when generational identity and experience has become a key factor in shaping political identity and affiliation in the UK and elsewhere in Europe and the US (Curtis, 2017; Ipsos Mori, 2017), this article sets out to examine the appeal that Corbyn has for Generation Y and the affective ties and identifications that emerge between young political followers and leaders such as Corbyn in the UK or Bernie Sanders in the US. As part of a study on the psychosocial dynamics of political followership, we held a number of group interviews with UK students in 2015-16, whose views about Corbyn and other political leaders emphasized the importance of trust, authenticity and emotional attachment and we draw on that research and its findings in the course of this article.<sup>4</sup>

In 2015, many were surprised that a 66-year-old parliamentary veteran (as Corbyn was then) who eschewed the conventional trappings and strategies of promotional celebrity politics found his biggest support amongst a demographic half his age (Dathan, 2015; Wheeler, 2016; Young, 2016). As the only anti-austerity UK political leader, Corbyn's popularity amongst left-of-centre voters was linked to that message; younger voters were also attracted to his left of centre policies and to his 'un-spun' public image (McTague, 2015). Despite the turn to the political right within Europe and the US, Corbyn's appeal none the less follows a similar political trend that speaks of disillusionment with the 'old' politics that for many, seems to prevail in the interests of a so-called powerful and self-serving 'elite' who perpetuate systems of inequality

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<sup>4</sup> This was a qualitative research project that included five focus groups made up of undergraduate and postgraduate students from a UK university in 2015-16. The groups contained both British and international students. All names and distinguishing features of the participants have been anonymised for this article.

(Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). Against a backdrop of promotional politics, where the ethos of advertising prevails and where political leaders are marketed like celebrities and perceived by many as ‘phony’, there is also a perception that modern political leadership and also policymaking have become disconnected from the wishes and needs of ordinary people. The disillusionment of voters with this process is particularly marked amongst the young, who have not benefited from the post-war settlement in the same way as their baby boomer parents (Intergenerational Foundation, 2016). The ‘emotional regimes’ of populism in Europe and the US have received increasing attention in political and communication studies (Lilliker, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018) and the emotional dynamics of politics have also been addressed in the Psychosocial Studies field (Auestad, 2014; Hoggett and Thompson, 2012; Richards, 2007, 2017; Yates, 2015, 2018). However, the specificities of political followership as an affective, psychosocial, relational phenomenon within the contemporary climate of an increasingly politicized younger generation remains under-researched.

The article begins by discussing the relationship between leadership and followership and we contextualize the emergence of Followership Studies in the field of political psychology and political communication by tracing its development over the last two decades. We turn to the value of a psychosocial approach to Followership Studies by discussing the ideas of three key figures within the field of relational psychoanalysis that include John Bowlby’s (1958, 1969, 1973) theory of attachment, Donald Winnicott’s (1971) theory of ‘transitional phenomena’ and thirdly, Heinz Kohut’s (1971) theory of narcissism and ‘self-objects’. We examine the usefulness of those theories through their application to the findings of the group interviews we conducted with students who discuss their attachment to Corbyn by stressing his significance as someone who seems to ‘care’ and we link their views to wider geopolitical and socio-economic factors related to postmaterialism (Inglehart, 2000). In combining

psychological and social perspectives to our analysis, the aim is to develop a psycho-political approach that allows new insights into the affective experience of political followership as an emerging area of research.

### **Mapping Leadership and Followership Studies**

Debates about the strategies and meanings of political leadership and its implications for followership have a long history and are often traced back to Machiavelli's 1513 *The Prince*, and its influence within political leadership studies remains undisputed (Ledeen, 1999). The influence of Machiavelli has entered the language of political culture and politicians of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have sometimes been accused of a 'Machiavellian style' of leadership.<sup>5</sup> The latter reinforces a manipulative model of leadership and the led, which resonates with contemporary cynicism about the integrity and trustworthiness of the political classes (Siddiqui, 2016).

As with the UK EU Referendum and the rise of populism in Europe and the US, political upheaval and social change often provides a context for shifting views of political leadership and its relationship to the led (Grint, 2013). The emergence of the 'charismatic leadership' model which was first established by Max Weber (2014) in his 1919 essay *Politik als Beruf* emerged as a result of the emergence of communism and fascism in European politics (Grint, 2013). Weber's approach to leadership prepares the groundwork for how political leaders are still perceived within large parts of the political sciences (Conger, 2013). For example, the

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<sup>5</sup> In the UK, Peter Mandelson who is often credited as the 'mastermind' behind the rise of Tony Blair and New Labour, has often been described in Machiavellian terms. See for example: Phillips, T. (1997) 'Mandelson: Machiavelli or Ordinary Bloke?' *The Independent*, 29 August, 1997, URL: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/mandelson-machiavelli-or-an-ordinary-bloke-1248000.html>, accessed 3 December 2016.

relationship between charismatic leadership and the celebritization of political leaders has been widely discussed as a key factor with reference to the mediatisation of politics today (Wheeler, 2013; Richards, 2007; Yates, 2011, 2014).

The historical significance of Weber's theory of the charismatic leader for this discussion is that Weber links the status of the leader as divine to the projections of the followers, thus making a shift away from political leadership as 'authority derived from traditions or rules which conferred legitimacy on individuals' (Conger, 2011 p. 86) towards an individual's traits, inaccessible 'to the ordinary person but [...] regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and of the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader' (Weber, 1947, pp. 358-359). Whilst applying the charismatic leadership model to political figures such as Churchill and Hitler have proved unsatisfactory (Conger, 2011), it nonetheless opens up a space to examine the significance of followership in shaping the conditions of leadership. For example, Weber said that charismatic leaders emerge at moments of social 'distress' and so as George Simmel (1964) also emphasized in his theory of the 'prestige leader', leaders and followers cannot exist without each other and the two states of mind of each are interlinked: 'All leaders are also led. I am their leader, therefore I must follow them' (Simmel, 1964, p.185).

Shifting the focus from leaders to followers suggests that charismatic leadership is a relational and perceptual phenomenon, as Willner argues: 'it is not what the leader is but what people see the leader as that count[s] in generating the charismatic relationship' (1984 pp.14-15). Today, the interactive relationship between followership and leadership is now more widely discussed in organizational studies where the notion of followership as a 'process' is also emphasized (Bennis, 2000; Carsten et al. 2014; Kelley, 1992; Uhl-Bein, et al., 2013). Yet as Gabriel (2011) argues, mainstream political psychology has tended to neglect political followership, and

instead tends to focus on the qualities of the leader. However, this is beginning to change, particularly in psychoanalytic studies of political leadership and followership where, as we discuss below, attachment theory has been used to explore the individual motivations of followers and their emotional identification with leaders (Game, 2011; Popper, 2014).<sup>6</sup>

The approach taken in this article is not so much about the individual feelings and intentions of leaders and the led but rather the wider cultural and psychosocial fantasies at play in the mutual shaping of the leader/follower relationship. Popper's (2014, p.109) concept of 'distant' followership<sup>7</sup> is promising in this respect, and can be applied to followers of political leaders such as Jeremy Corbyn. Popper uses attachment theory and also Freudian psychoanalysis to explore the attachments that emerge between leaders and followers and such an approach has much in common with the psychosocial object relations methodology that we use in this article.

Early psychoanalytic writings on the relationship between political leaders and their followers emerged from a desire to understand the motivations of authoritarian leaders and those of the so-called 'masses' who seemed to blindly accept the power of such men and their regimes (Adorno, 1950; Reich, 1933). That work, which took its lead from Freud's writings on the dynamics of group behavior (Freud, 1921), focused both on the narcissism of group members and on the fantasies of the leader as the symbolic father (Freud, 1921, 1930; Fromm, 1963). The analysis of the leader as the strong father of fantasy was also famously explored in Adorno et al's (1950) study of the authoritarian father. Since that period, with a few notable exceptions,

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<sup>6</sup> Psychoanalytic studies of the structural dynamics of leader-follower relationships is a well-established field in management and 'group relations' theory and yet this approach has been applied less in political psychology (Gabriel, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Which she takes to mean followers of managers or people in broader managerial positions (Popper, 2014 p.109).

(see, for example, Cluley, 2008 and Gabriel, 2011) psychoanalytic analyses of leadership have tended to focus more on the role of leadership than followership – often analysing the role of charisma and narcissism of individual leaders (Post, 1986, Stein, 2013). And yet, from a psychosocial perspective, a significant aspect of Freud’s work on leadership was his emphasis on the social dimensions of subjectivity and the interactive nature of leadership and followership. As Freud argued: ‘the contrast between individual psychology and social or group psychology, which at a first glance may seem to be full of significance, loses a great deal of its sharpness when it is examined more closely’ (1921, p. 95).

### **Leaders and Followers: A Relational Psychosocial Approach**

#### *i. The bonds of attachment*

The psychosocial dimensions of the relationship between leadership and followership can be examined through the application of relational psychoanalysis (Mitchell, 1988), which, while emphasizing the affective bonds of intersubjectivity and object relations, also draws on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). The latter seems apt given that a recurring theme in the study of political followership is the wish on the part of followers - particularly at times of insecurity - for a strong parent-like figure to keep them safe (Popper, 2014). Here, for example, Popper (2014, p.113) cites US President, Franklin D. Roosevelt whose popularity during the Great Depression of the 1930s provides a well-known example of this phenomenon. Attachment theorist John Bowlby (1958) argued that the experiential bonds of attachment are formed with the mother during the first twelve months of an infant’s life and are made up by a number of component instinctual responses related to feeding, clinging and so on. Bowlby argued that ‘infants and children experience separation anxiety when a situation activates both escape and attachment behavior but an attachment figure cannot be found’ (Bretherton, 1992

p.762). Pillai (1996) links this separation anxiety in infancy and the subsequent need for an attachment figure to the attraction of leaders and the willingness of followers to follow when there is a sense of existential threat.

One can argue that the application of Attachment Theory to the underpinning affective processes of followership is timely in the current climate of social and economic precarity (Standing, 2014) and can be applied to different styles of leaders. The attachment between Donald Trump and his supporters provides an example of this process at work where through his use of the slogan 'America First', he offers his followers a form of love and security (albeit in fantasy) by promising to re-establish a relationship to older visions of national and cultural identity (Churchwell, 2018). Paradoxically, as in the case of Trump, the appeal of attachment theory is that it opens up a space to think about the leader/follower relationship in ways other than that of the appeal of the strong father. Despite Trump's macho persona, his authoritarian policies and his promotion of a right-wing masculinist agenda, one can argue that his rhetorical style also evokes in another register, albeit in a perverse form, a form of maternal love to his core followers who feel forgotten and unloved by the rest of the nation (Hochschild, 2016). As he said at his Inaugural speech: 'I will take care of you...I promise you I will never let you down' (Trump, 2016). As we discuss below, the desire for attachment and security can also be viewed as an important aspect of Corbyn's appeal as a leader who projects an image of a politician who seems to care about ordinary people and their concerns. Indeed, this was a key theme of our group interviews with students who were attracted by his authenticity and empathy as a 'caring person', as when he sang 'Happy Birthday' to a tearful woman in Cocker mouth who had lost everything in a flood on the day of her birthday (The Guardian, 2015), or the widely publicized occasion when he encountered a rival football fan who encouraged him to become Prime Minister (Ramgobin, 2015).

Nonetheless, there are limits to the usefulness of attachment theory when applied to the dynamics of followership, as arguably it describes followers as individuals who simply have to be presented with a strong ‘caring’ leader in times of crisis and that this craving for attachment - as in the manner of ‘cupboard love’, automatically turns them into followers. Moreover, applying attachment theory to leadership in a democratic environment, fails to take into account why some competing leader figures are preferred over others in a multi-party system.

*ii. Leaders and followers: Winnicott and transitional object theory*

The work of the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott can be deployed in order to examine the psychodynamics of politics and its leaders in an age of social change and transition (Bowker and Buzby, 2017; Samuels, 2007; Yates, 2015). Here, it is argued that followers relate to leaders in the manner of a transitional object and that this relationship becomes linked to earlier unconscious patterns of experience shaped by the dynamics of separation and loss (Yates, 2014). Winnicott’s (1971) theory of transitional objects relates to the first ‘not-me’ possession of an infant and is ‘concerned with the first possession, and with the intermediate area between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived [...] a state between a baby’s inability and growing ability to recognize and accept reality.’ (ibid, p.104). In an infant’s development of around four to six months it begins to weave objects into its personal pattern of relating and during this phase the infant may find an object such as a bundle of wool, or the corner of a blanket given to it by their mother. These objects are significant when dealing with feelings of anxiety and the losses of separation and they help to make the transition into the world. In the early months of life, the infant has the illusion that the mother’s breast is part of the infant itself, not being able to distinguish between the two yet and that it is under the infant’s magical

control (p.112). During the gradual process of disillusionment and separation, it is the transitional object that eases the anxieties created through this process (p.114).

Winnicott's (1971) theory of transitional phenomena is suggestive when applied to the field of political leadership, allowing for a more complex reading of followership than attachment theory allows. As we have seen, Attachment Theory defines the leader-follower relationship as a potentially obedient one, as when looking up to an authoritative leader in times of crisis. One can argue that applying a transitional object approach allows for a more complex and nuanced reading of the leader-follower relationship especially with regards to the relational dynamics of younger voters, where, in certain contexts, the leader may function as a psychological object, enabling the subject to experience the psychosocial and cultural realities of politics in ways that are, in developmental terms, ontologically meaningful. The theory of transitional phenomena is pertinent when applied to political followers of the Millennial generation who are moving away from the home into adulthood and who are at a stage of the life cycle associated with a move towards greater autonomy and independence, a process that evokes the earlier childhood process of separation discussed by Winnicott in relation to transitional phenomena. Although the image and reality of family life has changed considerably to reflect the fragmented and fluid experience of contemporary 'mobile culture' (Elliott and Urry, 2010), one can nevertheless argue that feelings about family remain strongly associated with the psychosocial processes of attachment, disillusionment and separation as first discussed by Winnicott. Here, for example, it is perhaps significant that many of the students we interviewed defined the affective quality of their political attachments through a relational lens of family attachments, as one student participant told us: 'My dad has always voted Labour and my mum Conservative, but I am a Corbyn supporter'. Nonetheless, the relevance of Winnicott's ideas for political attachment extend beyond the immediate personal dynamics of family relations

and provides a framework through which to understand the affective appeal of political leaders for young people who may be leaving home, their families and in some cases their country of origin.

As we discuss, Corbyn's persona as a 'caring' non-impinging politician was a recurring theme of our interviews with young voters. One can argue that his 'caring' image allowed them during the 2015-16 period to identify with him as a version of Winnicott's (1953) 'transitional object', providing a sense of safety in an age of profound insecurity and crisis, thereby also illustrating the changing psycho-political dynamics of fantasy in personal and public life. The public interaction with him – or at least with his persona as a psycho-political object – not only holds out the potential comfort towards those who identify with him but it also mirrors the dynamics of *playing* with a transitional object. His regular appearances as a politician who interacts and speaks with his followers at popular cultural events such as the Glastonbury music festival or football matches and who even has his own supporters' chant 'Oh Jeremy Corbyn'<sup>8</sup> enhances this ludic process of 'political play' (Yates, 2015).

*iii. Leaders and followers: Heinz Kohut and the leader as self-object*

Making the transition from 'home' into the wider world and finding a sense of belonging can present a number of problems for young people. Such difficulties apply both in practical and symbolic terms. The late adolescent's fantasy of omnipotently creating a new world, one that is developmentally linked to much earlier stages of 'coming into being' as described by Winnicott (1971), is curtailed by a world of economic precarity and social insecurity. One could say that in the West, it is the baby boomer parents for whom the future seems to offer a

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<sup>8</sup> The chant 'Oh Jeremy Corbyn' is borrowed from The White Stripes 'Seven Nation Army'. See: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4\\_Yrwb4rh8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4_Yrwb4rh8), Accessed 3 May 2018.

brighter future (Coslett and Hanson, 2016). The disillusionment that the late adolescent experiences as a result of this precarity may motivate him or her to seek an object that s/he can possess and through which s/he can recover the lost or even thwarted omnipotence.

As our group interviews indicate, the pleasurable process of identifying with Corbyn can be explained by turning to Heinz Kohut's (1971) psychoanalytic concept of the narcissistic 'idealized self-object'. Interestingly, at a time when the concept of narcissism is now often used negatively to connote destructiveness and grandiosity in relation to leaders such as Trump (Stein, 2016), one can also see a more creative mode of narcissism in the emotional and idealizing investment that is made in the case of Corbyn by his young followers. Such a reading draws on Kohut's understanding of narcissism as a necessary and healthy component of development. Kohut's theory of narcissism begins with primary narcissism when the infant is merged with the mother. As the infant develops, the parents are internalized and idealized as omnipotent, but gradually through the course of development, the child becomes more autonomous and disillusioned and is increasingly able to engage with reality and transform the idealized elements in the parents into realistic good feelings about the self.

However, Kohut (1971) argued that there is also a need in a realistic way to have figures to look up to and admire, and politicians such as Corbyn could potentially be seen in this light. Kohut said that there are 'narcissistic stages of development' that are 'phase appropriate' and the identification with leaders represents an important ingredient in the development of selfhood and also in the identification with one's peer group as self-objects. There are similarities between the latter and Freud's (1921) theory of narcissistic identification between members of a group and their leader, and links can also be made to Christopher Bollas's (1993, p. 247) idea of a 'generational consciousness' – a concept that we return to later.

In order to reflect further on the psychosocial relational approach to political followership that we have begun to develop here, we now turn to the findings of the five unstructured group interviews about political leadership and followership that we carried out with students and members of ‘Generation Y’ in 2015-16.<sup>9</sup>

### **Interviewing Generation Y: ‘We just want someone to care’**

The desire for a new, empathic politics where political leaders can be trusted to ‘be themselves’ and demonstrate a capacity to genuinely relate to their supporters and ‘care’ for others were recurring themes of the group interviews that we held with students from Generation Y in 2015-16. The majority of the group participants were cynical about ‘smarmy politicians’ and the problems of engaging with a public relations-led politics shaped by what they saw as media ‘manipulation’. For these young people, notions of trust and authenticity were important when discussing the merits of political leaders and their own attachment to them. When asked about who they trusted in that context, most cited Barack Obama: ‘Barack Obama is just cool. He is obviously a nice guy, really’ (Participant 3.4). A young British man echoed that view:

I just think he is a good guy. I think he is a good person. Obama is [pause] his Presidency hasn’t been perfect but I mean no... none of them ever have been. But I’d like to think that he has done relatively good job, and just genuinely having the voice of reason over the time he has been in. And that is kind of like what Jeremy Corbyn has been over here. He (Corbyn) has definitely tried to stand up for sort of issues that are

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<sup>9</sup> These groups included undergraduate and post-graduate university students from Generation Y who were mixed in terms of gender, nationality, ‘race’ and ethnicity. There were 8 students in each group (40 in total) and as indicated, their names are anonymised and coded with numbers.

affecting the common everyday people, a lot more than all of the others put together, really. (Participant 4.2).

The discourse of ‘the caring politician’ as principled, ‘nice’ and ‘outside the system’ of promotional politics was regularly applied to Corbyn and the identification with him and his policies:

I feel like he is less of a lying politician than the other ones because he still sticks to the things that are never going to get him elected; so it probably means that he actually cares about them, I guess. And Barack Obama is just cool. He is obviously a nice guy, really. (Participant 1.6).

Another student cited Bernie Sanders as someone he admired as a ‘serious politician’ because he seemed authentic and therefore trustworthy:

He has also been in it for a long time. There’s pictures of Bernie Sanders chained to a fence like 40 years ago for black rights when no white people gave a [pause] or cared about black people’s rights and things. But Bernie Sanders actually did. So, like, [pause] he actually cares. Rather than caring being a good way of getting votes. He was actually doing it before it was a good idea politically. (Participant 2.6)

At the time of these groups, David Cameron was still the UK Prime Minister and he was contrasted unfavourably to Corbyn, and most agreed that Cameron was steeped in the values and practices of promotional politics and that he played too much to the camera:

He is really trained in PR and stuff. [pause] I would say that David Cameron is a bit of an embodiment of a lot of the UK. He is [pause] like a white man, he is in a suit and he is being a bit slimy. And he is like, he is quite on the ball. And like, smug. Which I would say quite a lot of our country is. Smug and our position like one of the most powerful countries in the world. I feel like he kind of embodies that. Like 'we're the UK' so [pause] that kind of thing. (Participant 2.3).

For the students in our study, Cameron's deployed the language of 'care' as part of a 'phony' and cynical attempt to connect with voters. By contrast, as one male student said:

I like Jeremy Corbyn purely because he - like wasn't expected to be there and he hasn't had the training and the PR speaking like he just has to come up with it on the fly with what he, you know is thinking about really. (Participant 3.5).

The 'normal' interactive social skills of Corbyn were an indicator of his capacity to care:

I think that with Jeremy Corbyn, because in 2010 or 2011 I went on an anti-war protest in London and Jeremy Corbyn was there and he went round the crowds and spoke to a few of us, and we had - sort of like a nice small chat, I guess from the footage it sort of had this initial favourable impression, I think even before he was, well even before he was in the front running, for the, for being Prime Minister. (Participant 5.1).

Others deployed the language of charisma and celebrity to describe their feelings of admiration for Corbyn as a powerful self-object as described by Kohut:

My friend, not me, cried when Labour didn't win the election, she was really upset, she met Jeremy Corbyn and she got star struck and couldn't speak in front of him. She's very emotional [laughs] I'm also a Corbyn girl. (Participant 1.2).

The language of fandom was also echoed in the words of this participant:

I sound like a fan boy but when -like - Corbyn came to the stage and he started getting people talking about - like a real change and talking about - like the things that have been on the fore front of people's minds, that are not just like topical catch-all phrases like 'immigration' and such. He started humanising issues a lot more.. (Participant, 1.4).

The notion of political 'fandom' has been discussed by scholars and journalists, particularly in relation to Corbyn's predecessor Ed Milliband, who attracted a strong online following from teenage girls (Minkel, 2015). And yet for some of our group interviewees, Corbyn's appeal was (like Obama) his resemblance to a 'good father': 'He is like a dad, a really cool dad'. For others, he seemed to skip a generation and they identified with him instead in non-oedipal terms as a 'grandad' or as an 'awkward uncle'. This relational and generational positioning of Corbyn placed him outside the traditional vertical structures of male leadership, authority and desire and instead it chimes in with contemporary studies that emphasize the horizontal nature of identification with political leaders (Richards, 2017; Yates, 2015). The latter contrasts with the dynamics of leaders represented by those defined by the participants as 'smarmy Cameron' or the 'untrustworthy' Blair who adopt a 'glossy PR image' and whose deployment of political communication reinforced for them an image of the dissembling politician who only pretends to care.

Corbyn's image as the empathic politician also seemed to evoke for these students - in fantasy at least – the 'holding' quality of maternal care discussed by Winnicott, thereby negating the older structures of patriarchal authority and the symbolic father associated with perceptions of a harsh political establishment. When it came to questions of intersectionality, the participants referred to Corbyn's policies rather than to his identity as a white, middleclass man. But it may be that his gender worked in his favour, as no women politicians were mentioned during the interviews in a favourable light.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, Corbyn's authentic 'caring' image rested on his status as a man who whilst being a leader of a major political party, was able to operate outside mainstream politics and convey a sense of integrity and gravitas as an older politician in a way that grandmothers and older women of colour are rarely able to do within a biased, masculinised UK political culture (Childs and Webb, 2012).

In order to understand more fully the motivations and feelings of our group interviewees, it is necessary to look further at the wider social and geopolitical context that shape political followership and the affective modes of subjectivity that underpin it. For example, the discourse of 'care' which dominated those interviews also extended to the wider context of globalized politics and a wish on the part of the group interviewees to 'make a difference' and connect with those beyond the shores of the UK. Such a wish contradicts stereotypical notions of millennials as 'selfish' and it also negates the 'them and us' dynamic of nationalism which is often a strong feature of the contemporary political scene more generally. Several of the participants identified themselves as 'global' subjects and as we have seen above, they rejected what they saw as the 'smug' arrogance of those politicians who viewed the UK as superior to other nations. (see Participant 2.3).

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<sup>10</sup> Instead, the students discussed the admirable qualities of white women celebrities such as Emma Watson and Angela Jolie who seemed authentic because they work outside the political system promoting 'positive causes'.

Tensions about the meanings of globalization were evident in the focus group discussions and contributed to the shaping of their views about the relationship between political leaders, trust, authenticity and the capacity to care. For example, at the same time as wanting to identify in a positive way as ‘global subjects’, there was also a desire on the part of those students for safety in a precarious world where the unpredictable forces of global capital created uncertainty and damaged the integrity of the political class. As one participant said:

There’s billions and billions worth of lobbying behind the scenes. And you don’t know what buttons to push to change it. And even though a politician could be sincere and everyone is like, [pause] like they know what they believe in, it is not their fault when things don’t go through or change. It is hard to really trust that anyone can get something done because money is just a massive global factor. (Participant 4.1)

Another participant echoed these views:

It’s never going to feel safe though. It is like you can have the most sincere, honest leader and yet it is like there’s a global political environment surrounding them. And everyone has got strings that could be pulled. It is just, it is like you could trust someone so much, but how do you know? (Participant 4.2).

In order to understand more fully the psychosocial and political implications of Corbyn’s appeal for those young people in the group interviews, it is necessary to say more the experience of globalization and the growth of post-material values amongst young adults that have emerged as a response.

## **Globalization, Uncertainty and Post-Materialist Values Amongst Corbyn Followers**

The concept of globalization has been defined variously in terms of greater mobility and the fluidity of identity formation (Elliott and Urry, 2010), the heightened perception of risk (Beck, 1992), economic and social precarity (Standing, 2014) and the loss of collective structures in favour of greater individualization (Bauman, 2007). Mills and Blossfeld (2003) argue that such changes are filtered through a range of key institutions that have led to an increase in the experience of uncertainty- particularly amongst young people who face a number of challenges related to establishing a life of their own in the same way as their parent's generation. As we have seen, one can argue that such anxieties underpin the support for politicians such as Corbyn, whose young political supporters identify with him as a trusted object of identification when moving out into the world and to create their own environment.

However, Corbyn's appeal is not only linked to the identification with him as a 'transitional' object or as a 'self-object'; his appeal is also related to the values and beliefs that he purports to represent. Here, one can argue that the values that are shared with Corbyn by the young are based on a post-materialist value system. In his 'World Values Study', Inglehart (1971) argues that there are generally two value systems, a materialistic value system and a post-materialistic values system. His scarcity hypothesis suggests that in times of low security, meaning economic uncertainty, conflict and threat of survival, materialistic needs are most important. When physical security is scarce, people give priority to materialistic goals such as economic and physical wellbeing (Inglehart, 1977). Whereas under conditions of prosperity 'people become more likely to emphasise [sic] 'post-materialist' goals such as belonging, esteem, and aesthetic and intellectual satisfaction' (Inglehart, 2008 p.131). In 2015, those contrasting values

were also expressed in the contrasting values between those of Corbyn and the then Prime Minister David Cameron.

At the time of Corbyn's election as the leader of the Labour Party in 2015, Cameron's public statements suggested a materialistic values system with his support for austerity and the notion of 'living within one's means' as a symbol of economic security (Hardy, 2013). By contrast, Corbyn's public statements seemed to suggest a post-materialistic value system, as his 2016 campaign page put it, 'with policies [...] based on justice, freedom, solidarity and equality for all.' (Corbyn, 2016). Those post-materialist values are reflected in Corbyn's statements about the economy in which he emphasized the importance of the community and the individual before economic growth and his opposition to austerity as an economic tool that damages local communities (Chessum, 2015). Corbyn's critique of the elite circles of Westminster and his call for a more democratic political process can also be read as post-materialistic values that 'emphasize self-expression instead of deference to authority' (Inglehart, 2000, p.223). Furthermore, his prioritization of environmental and cultural issues (Perraudin, 2015) can be viewed as an indicator of post-materialist values as defined by Inglehart (2000). Therefore, alongside the unconscious investments in Corbyn that we have described, one can argue that his success with young supporters and followers can be explained partly by Inglehart's (1977, 2000, 2008) observation that post-materialism is always dominant within the younger generation. Inglehart's socialization hypothesis suggests that the 'relationship between material conditions and value priorities' is not one of 'immediate adjustment', but rather 'one's basic values reflect the conditions that prevailed during one's pre-adult years' (2008, p.131). Subsequently, value changes occur mainly through intergenerational population replacement. The underlying assumption here is that one's basic value system and personality structure manifests itself by the time one reaches adulthood (Rokeach, 1968).

Life-cycle effects would, however, suggest that materialist values will increase over a lifetime and that young people will be as materialistic in their values as their parents' generation by the time they reach retirement (Inglehart, 2008). And yet, longitudinal data shows that this is not always the case and that post-materialist values are increasing over time (ibid.). Nonetheless, it is important to note that these value changes take place over a long period of time and very slowly. With a steady increase of post-materialist values in West Germany from 1945, it was not until 2006 that data showed a slight majority of post-materialist values among the German population (ibid. pp.136-137). This indicates that despite an almost sixty-year steady increase in prosperity, post-materialist values were reflected in a majority of the population in 2006 - emphasizing the slow change of values over time.

Applying the socialization hypothesis to Corbyn's followers suggests that it is Generation Y that is the most post-materialistic yet, and therefore the one whose values are most in tune with those of Corbyn. This does not mean however, that other generations cannot support those values and Inglehart's (2008) data does not suggest this either. As post-materialist values are a reflection of the conditions of one's pre-adult years, the socialization hypothesis does not exclude possible value changes among individuals of previous cohorts. It is perhaps interesting to note that Generation Y might be on the zenith of post-materialist value expression as prosperity and economic growth for wide swaths of the population seems to have stalled and might create a future where materialist values come to surface once more.

### **Political followership and the psychodynamics of a new generational consciousness**

It not surprising that a recurring theme of contemporary research into young people's attitudes centres on notions of uncertainty, pessimism about the future and an enforced sense of living in the present because of a lack of positive expectation about the future. Such uncertainty was also present in the group interviews we conducted. Winnicott (1971) emphasized the importance of a 'facilitating environment' in shaping the life of the child and its emerging self and also in helping it manage the process of gradual disillusionment and separation from the mother through the discovery and use of the transitional object. If the environment is not facilitating, then the transitional process of finding the object in the outside world is impeded. One can extend these ideas to questions of political followership, arguing that 'the outside world' has failed to provide a facilitating environment for this generation. Against that backdrop, there is Corbyn's vision of the Labour Party as a home for young idealistic supporters who use him as a transitional object to provide a sense of continuity and hope for the future. The latter is illustrated by the UK Labour party's election manifesto which specifically addresses millennial concerns (Labour Party, 2017).

The notion that a generation creates its own political objects resonates with Bollas's (1993) concept of 'generational consciousness'. Bollas develops Winnicott's theory to discuss the way that each generation creates their own potential space in which there is a 'clustering around common experiences' and where good and bad 'generational objects' are created and shared - as in particular loved songs or idols of popular culture (1993, p. 254). When Bollas published that discussion in 1993, the hopeful, generational dynamics that he describes were, for many, still present. By contrast, one could argue that in an age of anxiety, Generation Y has not been afforded the same opportunities to create a potential space for themselves to play and to create

for themselves a future in the same way as Bollas's generation. Nonetheless, as we have seen with the young people on our study, Corbyn's emphasis on non-material values potentially offers a form of positive mirroring and hope in that respect.

### **Towards a psychosocial model of political followership**

We have focused on the 2015 leadership election of Corbyn and his appeal for young people in order to examine the psychodynamics of political followership – a topic which in the field of political psychology and political communication has tended to be neglected or taken for granted as a symptom of leadership in an era of promotional politics. Our aim has not only been to foreground the importance of researching political followership but also to emphasize the psychosocial nature of the leader-followership relationship and to examine the unconscious and affective processes that shape it in particular historical, social and political moments. That approach, which applies psychoanalytic understandings of attachment and object relating is timely and necessary in the highly emotional and unpredictable populist climate of contemporary politics.

We have not taken up a position in relation to Corbyn and his policies, but rather our aim has been to highlight the ways in which his appeal for young people can be interpreted. Inglehart's (1977) scarcity hypothesis and socialization hypothesis allows us to place Corbyn's values in close proximity of Generation Y's values, thereby giving a possible explanation for the strong support of Generation Y for Jeremy Corbyn as the Labour membership data suggests. Whilst attachment theory can begin to shed light upon the attachments that can form between leaders and followers, we developed that approach to followership by applying Winnicott's (1971) theory of transitional phenomena (1971) and also Kohut's (1971) theory of self-objects and

narcissism to account for the multi-layered and complex bonds between political leaders and their followers.

The element of anxiety which we linked to the search for a good object is visible in early life course of Generation Y and the uncertainty generated through the impact of globalization and the institutional filters described by Mills and Blossfeld (2003). The latter impacts Generation Y disproportionately which therefore increases uncertainty amongst that generation, leading to concerns about the need for a leader who ‘cares’ and who can be trusted and in 2015, Corbyn resonated powerfully as an evocative object of the political imagination. And yet, since 2016, there has been much conflict within the Labour Party about the political style and direction under Corbyn and two years on in April 2017, a poll reported a drop in its membership where the popularity of Corbyn for young people of between 18-24 years had fallen by ten per cent (Dore, 2017). Whatever the nature of the shifting status of Corbyn’s popularity amongst younger voters, the British Election Study (Prosser et al, 2018) indicated that while the under 20 vote dropped slightly, the overall millennial vote rose substantially, indicating the importance of understanding of young political followers and their psychosocial motivations.<sup>11</sup>

Political Followership Studies is still a relatively new area of study and it opens up an opportunity to investigate phenomena such as young followership in more detail and with a variety of different approaches and application. In future, the term ‘supporter’ might be more suitable as it escapes the cultish connotations of the term ‘follower’ as someone who lacks agency and who is led blindly by a leader. For the time being, however, we would argue that a psychosocial approach that applies relational psychoanalysis alongside sociological, political

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<sup>11</sup> YouGov declared that age has become the key predictor of voting intention in British politics (Curtis, 2017).

and cultural theory provides a useful interdisciplinary approach through which to unpack and understand the complex relationships between leaders and their followers.

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