This study examines the views of politics presented by young people in contemporary Britain. Kum-Kum Bhavnani argues that previous studies of youth and youth culture have been limited by too great a reliance on simple survey techniques, and by lack of attention to conceptions of politics amongst young people, and to politics as a series of lived relationships rather than a set of external objects. Instead, she uses ethnographic approaches and open-response interviewing within the broad theoretical framework of social representations. The political is taken to refer to the ways in which people regulate, and attempt to regulate with a view to challenging, unequal social relationships. Within this the specific issues examined are employment, unemployment, youth training schemes, democracy and voting, racism, and marriage. Bhavnani’s analysis, organised by themes such as disposable income and social and personal control, tackles questions of power in the research process; and a notion of discursive configurations as distinct from social representations.
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Talking politics

A psychological framing for views from youth in Britain

Kum-Kum Bhavnani

Department of Applied Social Studies,
University of Bradford
For my mother and late father
who both taught me that politics
is the stuff of life
The epigraphs have been wrongly placed and should read as follows:

**Chapter 1**
In activity there is good fortune  
*Arab Proverb*

**Chapter 2**
A minority, that is to say a group that finds itself in opposition, can submit itself and obey when it feels that the majority represents and is building a national community. Otherwise one big gang has power over a small gang, that is all. This, I must warn you, is the philosophical approach. But without this you cannot understand politics. And what is philosophy today becomes reality tomorrow.  
*C. L. R. James*

*At the Rendezvous of Victory*

**Chapter 3**
You see, I have survived so long,  
my habit of observation grown so strong  
that sometimes I think I almost belong.  
I know exactly how a tiger drinks  
how a tiger walks, smiles and thinks,  
but find somehow that I cannot ape  
that unthinking pride or its manifest shape.  
I fully understand the Tigrish Cause  
and keep my distance from those massive jaws.  
*Suniti Namjoshi*  
‘Among Tigers’

**Chapter 4**
Nevertheless and notwithstanding differences of power, money, race, gender, age and class, there remains one currency common to all of us. There remains one thing that makes possible exchange, shared memory, self-affirmation and collective identity – our language.  
*June Jordan*

*On Call. Political Essays*

**Chapter 5**
What is life?  
A friend tells me, ‘Life means finding happiness in hardships.’  
‘No!’ I say. ‘Life is an endless battle with fate.’  
*Zhang Jie*

*Leaden Wings*

**Chapter 6**
We, the older generation, did not yet understand, as most men do, and as young women are learning today, that work and the longing for love can be harmoniously combined, so that work remains as the main goal of existence.  
*Alexandra Kollontai*

*Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Woman*

**Chapter 7**
For my family, my strength  
For my comrades, my light  
For the sisters and brothers whose fighting spirit was my liberator  
For those whose humanity is too rare to be destroyed by walls, bars, and death houses  
And especially for those who are going to struggle until racism and class Injustice are forever banished from our history.  
*Angela Y. Davis*

*Angela Davis: an Autobiography*
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Preface

The book is a report of a study I conducted in the mid 1980s. The project was an empirical exploration of the ways in which young working-class people discussed issues in the domain of the political. Sitting as I am, writing this introduction at a time when I am teaching courses in feminist epistemologies and social psychology – my two major academic passions – I’m reminded of the question which I am asked with a certain regularity: ‘What does this project have to do with your interests in "race" and gender?’ This is, surprisingly perhaps, more difficult to answer than it appears. To say that over the past twenty years I’ve been involved politically and academically with a range of educational institutions and other organisations on issues of racism, black struggle, and feminist challenges to prevailing inequalities seems to avoid the question. To reply that such a history means that the research project could not help but be informed by such issues suggests that there was no conscious attempt on my part to think through some of the implications of my personal biography for my academic work. But I now realise that it is the question itself which needs unpacking. The question contains an implicit notion that feminism within an academic context must be expressed through research projects which focus only on women. And one means of keeping feminist ideas alive in the academic arena is certainly through such projects as well as through Women’s Studies courses (but see Coulson and Bhavnani 1989 for some cautionary comments). Gendered inequalities also express themselves, however, in the relationships between women and men, and the process of conducting research can also demonstrate this. Often, this can be done by the project simultaneously inverting and subverting the most commonly encountered of such relationships; in this way, such a project is able to contribute to the development of feminist ideas.

I hope the work discussed in this book is one such project. Further, the way in which certain feminist analyses and practices are able to infuse academic work is also by using these insights within the more longer established disciplines.

Social psychology is one area of thought which could certainly benefit from such insights. Despite some recent and very exciting work in psychology which I have read both for this book and more recently (e.g. Billig 1987, 1989; Gallagher 1987; Griffin 1986c; Parker 1989; Parker and Shotter 1990; Phoenix 1988; Reicher 1988; Squire 1989), it is the case that (much of the above work being exceptions) the questions raised by many
Preface

academic feminists (e.g. Hartsock 1983; Harding 1987; Smith 1987) – who are often viewed as being outside of psychology – are defined as marginal, more like the ‘icing’ on the basic cake of experimental methods and operational definitions. The ‘basic cake’ approach reflects a limited notion of what constitutes social psychology, and suggests that the parochialism apparent within much of feminism and Women’s Studies (see the arguments of e.g. Moraga and Anzaldua 1981; Davis 1981; Grewal et al. 1988; hooks 1989; Hull et al. 1982; Sandoval 1982 for differing, yet often complementary analyses of such parochialism) is also a key aspect of that universe of discourse which is labelled social psychology.

The project of this book was to show that it is necessary to break out of such intellectual parochialism, and the study is an attempt to demonstrate one means of doing exactly that. This study is an interdisciplinary one, drawing as it does on a range of arguments within the human sciences. However the goal of the project, to undermine psychological parochialism, requires that I specifically address social psychological analyses. Hence the focus on psychological understandings – in both the empirical and theoretical literature.

The arguments and interviews presented in this book were developed between early 1984 and early 1988. The motivation to conduct the project stemmed from my anxiety about the dramatic rise in youth unemployment in Britain as well as a desire to explore how those young people most immediately affected by this rise would discuss it. However, in looking at the academic and more popular literature, it was clear that there was conceptual and methodological confusion about young people and the ways in which young people understood issues in the domain of the political. In other words, the frequent use of standardised questionnaires in much of the work I have read has a tendency to turn the gaze away from the ways in which politics, for example, is about lived relationships (Hall 1984). Such research strategies whilst having considerable strengths, can not show how people seek to understand, accommodate to and change the institutional and social relationships, often rooted in inequality, which shape their everyday lives. This seems to be a task with which social psychology can grapple.

The developments within European social psychology, specifically the discussions and debates around Social Representations appeared to be the theoretically most promising starting point for such questions. As I argue both in chapter 3 and in the final chapter, social representations theory need not be understood solely in the context of a Durkheimian functionalism, but rather may be a means for seeing that human agency is integral to the relationship between ‘ideas’ and ‘practices’. That is, social representations
Preface

theory is a starting point for understanding how knowledges about the world are both constituted within the world, as well as being used to reconstitute the world. In this book, I suggest that ‘social representations’ be recast as ‘discursive configurations’ in order to account both for human agency in the context of powerful institutional forces, as well as to understand such agency as existing within unequal power relationships.

Substantively, chapters 5 and 6 show that the young people interviewed were prepared to discuss in dynamic and exciting ways issues in the domain of the political, often very wittily. They were engaged with the topics – unemployment, democracy, racism, marriage, their futures – and frequently talked at length and with considerable liveliness about their own views and analyses of these issues. The main proviso seemed to be that the discussions not be restricted to a notion of political which was only concerned with parliamentary parties. In other words, their words, it can be seen that non-involvement with political parties, for example, must not be understood solely as an indication of indifference but may be an active and at times politically self-conscious means for dealing with the social world.

But such insights are not developed by analysing the interviews, in vacuo. The existence of the researcher, and the very act of conducting interviews, demands a reflexivity in the analysis. The interviews themselves can then be situated, and the comments of the interviewees understood as complex themes which are produced within the specific context of a particular research relationship. It was this commitment to a reflexivity in analysis of ‘data’ which led me to think through some of the possible implications of a black woman interviewer, in her mid thirties (defined as ‘middle class’ in Registrar General’s terms by virtue of being associated with a university) talking with 16-year-olds. From the pilot work in Sheffield and the time spent ‘hanging around’ in the shopping centre it was clear that some thought needed to be given to the reasons why particular themes might arise and be used in the interviews. That is, the process of intellectual production in this research context needed to be peeled open in order to reveal greater analytic insights into the ‘data’. But in doing that (see Bhavnani 1990) it became clear that all research studies need to analyse the context in which the ‘data’ is obtained. In other words, the apparent unusual-ness of a black woman interviewing white men, as in this study, seems to demand analysis and comment. But as the ‘phenomenon’ is analysed and examined, it becomes clear that it is the more commonly occurring research relationships which mask the shifting relationships of power inequalities in the conduct of social research. At the risk of labouring the point, all research requires such commentary in order to better understand it. Such a suggestion is not new.
(e.g. Cliffford and Marcus 1986), but it is a discussion which has not even
begun to happen within social psychology, despite the urgings of some anti-
racist psychologists when they were working to counter the ideas of Jensen
and Eysenck in the early 1970s (e.g. Richardson, Spears and Richards 1972).

And this then leads to the point about ‘race’. Sensitivity to a culturally
inherited sexual division of labour can be expressed, as I have argued above,
by demonstrating that the work is informed by feminist agendas. This is true
of this study – the ways in which the research questions were developed
(section 2.6), the self-conscious inclusion of both women and men, black
and white as interviewees, as well as in the topics, the interviews and their
analysis. Further, the discussion of reflexivity in the research process is a
direct consequence of many arguments from within ‘feminist research’. It is
clearly much harder to specify some of the agendas for ‘anti-racist’ research
strategies without making global, general statements with which very few
readers of this book would disagree. Further, Meg Coulson and I have
argued (Bhavnani and Coulson 1986) for an understanding of racism based
on the notion of racially structured capitalist patriarchies. To be sensitive to
‘race’ stereotypes within a research project such as this still, however,
demands careful thought in order to challenge the processes by which
women become invisible within the category ‘youth’, challenging a
‘victimology’ understanding of young black people in relation to
unemployment, as well as to challenge descriptions of black youth which
feed in to racist discourses via the process of pathologisation. In other
words, there is a need to avoid static concepts of ‘race’ and ethnicity, which
are defined as static and unchanging. I hope I have succeeded in this task,
while at the same time recognising and analysing the specific ways in which
the ‘multiple axes of oppression’ (Frankenberg 1988), which include racism,
are constitutive, constituted, immanent, and resisted.

Thus, this project, in working on the boundaries of feminism, social
psychology and ‘anti-racism’ is one which has been both productive and
stimulating. The frequent exclusions of women from consideration of youth
culture are dealt with, the oft-assumed inevitability of the views of young
black women and men about unemployment are re-examined, and the
necessity to complicate and thus clarify social psychological understandings
of human agency, specifically in relation to social representation have been
some of the key goals in writing this book. The ways in which different
constituencies may receive the work (see Mani 1990 for an invigorating
analysis of this issue in relation to her own work) is something I shall have
to wait for to find out. In the meantime, I hope you enjoy the book.
Acknowledgements

The young women and men interviewed for this study provided me with endless hours of stimulation, interest and challenge. I am extremely grateful to them for sharing their ideas and their time with me, and I should also like to thank the head teachers and the teachers of the Middington\(^1\) schools for their co-operation.

Sally Roberts gave unstintingly of her time and energy, especially in the final stages of the write-up of this whole project, and did this with a calmness and efficiency which was very good for me. The same is also true of Stephanie Macek and Sarah Pyett who always found time when proofreading had to be done, or bibliographies checked.

This book was originally submitted as a Ph.D. dissertation in February 1988 at the University of Cambridge, England. That work would not have been started, or completed, without the committed support of my supervisor, Colin Fraser. The examiners – Michael Billig and Ray Jobling – provided many enthusiastic comments and urged me to publish the dissertation as a book. This is the result of their urging.

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\(^1\) Middington is the fictional name of the town where much of the work was conducted. All the names – of towns and schools – have been altered to fictional names in order to preserve confidentiality.
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