Youth Civic Development: Historical Context and Emerging Issues

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Abstract

The civic domain has taken its place in the scholarship and practice of youth development. From the beginning, the field has focused on youth as assets who contribute to the common good of their communities. Work at the cutting edge of this field integrates research and practice and focuses on the civic incorporation of groups who often have been marginalized from mainstream society. The body of work also extends topics of relevance to human development by considering themes of justice, social responsibility, critical consciousness, and collective action. © 2011 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
Over the past few decades, there has been a growing awareness of the civic/political domain as a context for adolescent and youth development. Signs that this field has come of age include the formation of CIRCLE (www.civicyouth.org), a national research organization and clearinghouse on youth civic engagement and the publication of the first *Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth* (Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010). In addition, two prominent international reports on youth in the majority world devoted chapters to citizenship. Both *Growing Up Global: The Changing Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries* (Lloyd, 2005) issued by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine’s Committee on Population and *World Development Report: Development and the Next Generation* issued by the World Bank (2007) considered the civic engagement of younger generations important in its own right, but also critical for the health of communities, economies, governments, and societies.

**An Evolving Field**

Scholarly interest in the civic/political domain had been increasing in North America and Western Europe, in part, due to concerns that recent cohorts of young adults had become disengaged from politics and civic life, and that the community organizations that ushered younger generations into civic/political life were on the decline (Putnam, 2000). Consequently, attention turned to the developmental precursors of adult political engagement and to a definition of civic life that expanded beyond electoral politics.

From its inception, this field involved practitioners and scholars from multiple disciplines, most notably, education, youth development, political science, and psychology. Besides its multidisciplinary character, it also was a field that believed in the reciprocal relationship between theory and practice. In this regard, the contributions of two bodies of scholarship are especially noteworthy. Research on positive youth development (PYD) and on service learning/community service both have focused attention on the contributions that young people make to their communities (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Furco & Root, 2010). These fields have contributed to our understanding of youth as assets to their communities and as agents of social change; they also have pointed to the opportunities for civic engagement in the contexts where young people spend time. Research on civic education and on extracurricular and community-based organizations has complemented this scholarship.

What have we learned? First, youth are more likely to be civically active as adults if they have had opportunities during adolescence to work collaboratively with peers and adults on engaging issues and to discuss current events with parents, teachers, and peers. Interest in political issues tends to be generated by controversy, contestation, discussion, and the perception that it matters to take a stand. Second, young people’s sense of...
social incorporation (solidarity with others, identification with community institutions, being respected and heard by adults) is a psychological factor that is positively related to youth assuming social responsibility for others in their communities and for taking civic actions (e.g., voting and volunteering) in young adulthood. These relationships are true for youth from different social class and ethnic backgrounds. Third, there is a class and racial divide in the civic opportunities available to young people: cumulative disadvantage built up over the years of pre-school through twelfth grade (including the lack of opportunities to practice civic skills, the competing demands on attention and time of living in economically stressed communities, and especially events such as dropping out of school or getting arrested) depresses civic incorporation and civic action later in life. Fourth, besides opportunities, there are traits of personality (e.g., extraversion, confidence, optimism) that predispose some youth to join organizations and get engaged in civic action. Fifth, youth engagement in meaningful civic projects is positively associated with their psychosocial well-being and mental health.

This volume of *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* builds on the extant body of work and pushes the boundaries in cutting-edge theoretical, empirical, and practical directions. Like the PYD and service learning paradigms, the focus is on youth as assets, acting in the broader and best interests of their communities. Nevertheless, contributors to the volume press beyond these paradigms by raising issues of social justice and unequal access to society’s resources for groups of youth who are marginalized from the mainstream. Further, besides identifying inequalities in access, the authors expound on ways that young people are contesting those injustices by taking action. Moreover, several chapters focus on groups of youth who often have been left out of the literature on youth civic engagement. Three chapters focus in particular on the political/civic actions of youth in the United States who are marginalized due to their social class, ethnic minority, or immigrant status. Two others draw from research on youth in the majority world.

The volume also makes cutting-edge contributions to theory in this field and in the broader field of adolescent development, in part because contributors have extended the boundaries of questions to ask, and of groups of young people to include in answering them. The lens is on the value of collective action and commitment to a common good for adolescent development. In itself, this is a departure from the more common emphasis on individual and interpersonal relationships in the field of youth development.

**Organization of the Volume**

Laura Wray-Lake and Amy Syvertsen open the volume with a chapter on the developmental origins of social responsibility in childhood and
adolescence. This value orientation, which is based on empathy with others, transcends self-interest and links one’s well-being and fate with those of fellow human beings. Thus, social responsibility refers to obligations for our common good or shared self-interest with fellow citizens and human beings. Arguing that this value orientation is at the heart of civic/political action, Wray-Lake and Syvertsen trace its developmental foundations to socialization that emphasizes principles of care and justice and that respects children’s rights to participate in democratic decision making. Socialization practices such as modeling prosocial action (e.g., parents’ own involvement in community action) or emphasizing standards of concern or care for others when communicating with children nurture socially responsible children and adolescents.

In the next chapter, Brian Christens and Ben Kirshner provide an integrative and historical analysis of the interdisciplinary field of youth organizing. They trace the evolution of this field that from the beginning was attentive to the insights and the anger of young people who were marginalized from mainstream institutions. The authors characterize the field of youth organizing as a combination of community organizing, with its emphasis on ordinary people working collectively to advance shared interests, and positive youth development, with its emphasis on asset-based approaches to working with young people. Based on an impressive body of scholarship employing different theoretical perspectives, Christens and Kirshner identify common elements of this form of youth civic engagement including relationship development, popular education, social action, and participatory research and evaluation. In just a little over a decade, youth organizing has evolved from an innovative, but marginal model to one that is widely recognized, respected, and adopted by community-based youth development organizations.

In the next chapter on critical consciousness, Roderick Watts, Matthew Diemer, and Adam Voight also apply a historical lens by locating the theoretical origins of this approach to youth political development in Paulo Freire’s classic work in Brazil. The capacities of people—regardless of their background or education—to analyze their society and their place in it is the process of becoming conscious, as Freire advocated. Not surprisingly, issues of social justice emerge when it is the powerless who participate in this process. However, awareness is only the beginning. According to Watts, Diemer, and Voight, besides critical reflection, critical action and political efficacy are core components of critical consciousness as an approach to youth political development.

The political consciousness and action of Latina/o immigrants is the subject of the next chapter. Author Hinda Seif illustrates several ways in which attention to the political activities of this group enrich the field of youth civic engagement. First, although undocumented immigrants are, in principle, the object of anti-immigrant discourse and policies, discrimination also is leveled at Latina/os who are citizens of the United States or
legal residents because of their shared cultural/ethnic identity. Thus, Latina/o youth, regardless of their legal status, have a vested interest in a shared political cause. Second, attention to the forms that immigrants' engagement takes expands the concept of civic participation. Although immigrant youth may not be eligible to vote, many volunteer in their communities and mediate between their cultural group and mainstream culture, often interpreting policy and the law for older members of their ethnic group. The high level of young Latina/o participation in protests against anti-immigrant legislation belies assertions that they are politically disengaged. Finally, Seif raises a developmental argument about the dawn- ing of political consciousness in this group. Whereas they are guaranteed rights to public education in childhood, they are excluded from other routes to citizenship upon graduation from high school. Attaining the American dream via access to education has become the political cause uniting Latina/o youth and lobbying for DREAM legislation has resulted in many becoming political leaders, symbols for younger and older co-ethnics.

The last two chapters move beyond the United States. First, Robert Serpell, Paul Mumba, and Tamara Chansa-Kabali describe an innovative elementary curriculum in a rural community in Zambia and document the long-term impact on social responsibility in young adulthood. The Child-to-Child (CtC) curriculum focuses on health education and practices that enable children to assume responsibility for the health of younger peers. President Kenneth Kaunda officially launched the program in Zambia with a call for all children to consider themselves champions of people's health. The curriculum builds on the common practices of many African cultures of assigning children responsibilities for the community early in life. Mumba describes the democratic practices that he adopted as a teacher of the CtC curriculum including mixed-gender peer groups that emphasized interdependence in learning; gender neutrality in the allocation of tasks and leadership; group collaboration and evaluations based on group performance, which encouraged faster learners to help slower students; children's rights to voice and to disagree with one another; and opportunities for contributing to the nurturant care of younger children and for engagement in public service. The authors end their chapter with a summary of their follow-up research with young adults seventeen years after completing the CtC program. Participants reported that involvement in CtC promoted their personal agency, cooperative disposition, attitudes toward gender equality, and civic responsibility in early adulthood.

The volume closes with a chapter by Constance Flanagan, M. Loreto Martinez, Patricio Cumsille, and Tsakani Ngomane. Drawing from studies and historical events in many parts of the majority world, these authors argue that there are certain universal aspects of the civic domain in youth development. These include the primacy of collective action for forming
political identities and ideas and the greater heterogeneity of encounters in the civic when compared to other activity domains; the groupways or accumulated opportunities for acting over the course of childhood and adolescence due to the groups (cultural, gender, social class, caste, etc.) to which a young person belongs; and the role of mediating institutions (schools, community-based organizations, etc.) as spaces where the younger generation’s collective actions contribute to political stability and change. The authors argue that theory in the broader field of youth development could be enriched by systematically attending to these common elements of the civic domain.

Conclusion

The chapters in this volume have in common a set of understandings that are drawn from the contemporary scholarship on positive youth development and civic engagement. For example, all of the authors embrace perspectives on young people as societal assets that should be supported to develop to their greatest potential, rather than treated as latent problems or sheltered from interactions with their communities. All of the authors argue for more intergenerational and inclusive public policies and practices in community and organizational settings. Moreover, all authors share the perspective that societies are enhanced when young people are able to participate and contribute in meaningful ways. These core understandings have been steadily gaining wider acceptance, not only in the study of childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood, but also in practice across many fields and settings.

However, the chapters in this volume also go further by pointing to emerging directions within the young field of youth civic development. Drawing out the various strands from this issue, we believe that there are cases to be made for several pertinent and emerging directions for theory, research, and action. First, issues of justice and power continue to dwell at the margins of the larger discussions on positive youth development and the most prevalent models for youth civic engagement (e.g., service learning, volunteering). More of these models, and more of the empirical and theoretical work on positive youth development, should consider the implications of systematic injustices and the possibilities for building power among marginalized groups and solidarity across lines of difference. Second, the majority world should feature more prominently in research on youth civic development—for theory’s sake, if not for the simple reason that the majority world is home to the vast majority of young people. Third, the challenges faced by marginalized populations in both the majority and minority worlds should become the focus of more action-oriented work on positive youth development and civic engagement. Growing inequalities mean that the need is ever greater for models that engage young people in the task of addressing social and political challenges through democratic
action. More of the research on youth development and civic engagement should meet these challenges head on (Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

The contributions of the volume to theory also derive from the fact that the authors take seriously Kurt Lewin’s (1951) commitment to action research and his appreciation that both theory and practice are enriched when scholars and practitioners collaborate in defining the questions and methods of inquiry. Lewin’s observation is now six decades old but still resonates today:

Many psychologists working today in an applied field are keenly aware of the need for close cooperation between theoretical and applied psychology. This can be accomplished in psychology, as it has been accomplished in physics, if the theorist does not look toward applied problems with high-brow aversion or with a fear of social problems, and if the applied psychologist realizes that there is nothing so practical as a good theory. (p. 169)

The intimate connection between theory and practice is a common denominator in these chapters. For example, youth organizing is based on an integration of community-based practice with scholarship and analysis of the practice. Theory about social change in the gender attitudes of young adults in Zambia emerges from a careful analysis of the practice in the CtC curriculum that tried to change those attitudes.

Through this interconnected view of research and practice, the chapters in this volume also identify applications to practice. These are relevant across the full spectrum of youth-oriented and intergenerational settings (e.g., educational institutions, after-school programs, nonprofit organizations) and the policies that support this work. Critical consciousness (Watts, Diemer & Voight, this volume) and social responsibility (Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, this volume) provide two conceptual anchor points for practice. In addition, both concepts represent potential target outcomes for youth programming and education. Experiential education and participatory action research are two of the most promising mechanisms for developing social responsibility and critical consciousness. Examples of programs and settings that incorporate these mechanisms include youth organizing initiatives like those described by Christens and Kirshner, youth-led curriculum like the CtC curriculum described in the chapter by Serpell, Mumba, and Chansa-Kabali, and involvement in social movements like the young leaders organizing for immigrant rights described in the chapter by Seif. Further, the more common settings that youth inhabit (e.g., schools, sports teams, and other extracurricular activities) can become more explicit in their intent to cultivate civic development including social responsibility and critical consciousness.

Besides practice, theories of youth development also are enriched by attention to the civic domain. As Flanagan, Martinez, Cumsille, and Nogomane discuss, there are universal aspects of this domain that transcend
particular polities and cultures. Scholarly attention to the collective actions of young people working to make their schools or their nations more inclusive may yield new insights into ways that people fulfill the human need to belong. Exposure to more heterogeneous people and perspectives through civic action may enhance adolescents’ intellectual and reflective capacities. Moreover, understanding why young people engage in civic work may expand theories of motivation and purpose. In particular, attention to the civic actions of young people who are all too often absent from research should expand our paradigms of youth development and the way we frame our inquiries. This volume of New Directions in Child and Adolescent Development signifies that youth civic engagement has come of age as an important domain of youth development. Nonetheless, in its relatively short life span, the field has evolved and the future is wide open.

References


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