



Civic commitment in young activists: Emergent processes in the development of personal and collective identity

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ABSTRACT

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Through a qualitative approach this study documents life experiences that youth with a history of sustained social and political participation judge as significant in the development of their civic commitment. Data is drawn from in-depth interviews to 6 Chilean youth (3 ages 16–19; 3 ages 20–24 years) of diverse socioeconomic condition, with a history of 3–7 years of active participation in prosocial and political organizations. Grounded theory was used to generate inductive knowledge of the processes that led to commitment and further sustained civic participation. Participants' trajectories of commitment illustrate both individual and contextual sources that motivate their sustained action. Participants identify with social and political causes and integrate them to their personal identities. Their sustained social action is related to identification with the goals of the organizations they belong to. Their accounts convey a collective sense of we developed through working toward shared goals with other organization members. Findings speak to the role that youth can play in advancing social and political ideologies and are discussed in light of identity theory and sociopolitical development.

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Youth is an appropriate time to study how commitment to civic or political causes develops and can further continue into young adulthood. Abstract reasoning in cognitive and moral domains (Collins, 1997; Kohlberg, 1973) enhances adolescents' capacity for perspective taking, self-reflection, and feelings of responsibility toward others. As part of identity exploration youth reflect on the values, ideologies and belief systems that will guide their life (Erikson, 1968). Two forms of exploration–relationships with others (Collins, Gleason, & Sesma, 1997) and ideological commitments (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Hart & Carlo, 2005) are prominent as youth try to sort a belief system.

From a developmental point of view only some individuals within a certain generation will commit to civic purposes (Hardy & Carlo, 2005). The construction of identity comprises processes that are driven by the individual. However, to understand this individual process it is important to consider how identity develops in interaction with the multiple contexts that adolescents experience and how the relationships they establish with significant persons shape their self definitions (Harter, 1999).

Findings by Smetana and Metzger (2005) suggest that civic engagement is connected to experiences within the family and church. Beyond the family, adolescents have more opportunities to become agents in their social roles and responsibilities. Participation in community fosters dispositions for citizenship by connecting adolescents to society, enhancing their awareness of social and political issues, and stimulating their sense of agency and social responsibility (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). Further, service activities (e.g., volunteering, community activities) place youth in role taking and decision-making situations. Therefore, participation in service has the potential to advance moral beliefs and consideration for others (Hart & Carlo, 2005).

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The civic components of identity (Flanagan, 2003a,b) comprise processes by which adolescents transcend self-interest and aim to contribute to a larger cause, group, or interest (Youniss & Yates, 1997). Commitment to civic issues is best represented as a collection of cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioral forces. Data on youth as agents of their commitment can shed light on the motivations and meanings underlying their civic commitment (Matsuba & Walker, 2005) and allow examination of the processes from a person centered perspective.

Few studies have addressed how youth develop their commitment to civic causes (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998) or how they signify their experiences in community programs (Kirschner, 2009). Further, most have been done with North American youth. This paper extends research to youth in Latin America. Using a broad definition of civic commitment (i.e., membership in organizations or youth-organized groups that work toward prosocial and political goals), it analyzes socialization experiences that youth connect to the development of their commitment and their motivation for civic action. From the actor's perspective, it explores how commitment develops by identifying experiences and hypothesizing processes that youth report as significant in their personal history of civic involvement.

The social and cultural contexts where youth develop their civic dispositions differ across societies (Flanagan, Martínez, & Cumsille, 2010). Parents from different cultures may create unique opportunities and practices to socialize their children (Grusec & Davidov, 2007). Thus, youth meanings and opportunities for civic engagement are likely to vary as a function of the unique social norms, mores, and belief systems actualized in families, schools, and the organizations where youth serve. The dynamic interplay among beliefs, norms, and perceptions creates a moral atmosphere that is embedded in each culture.

Knowledge about the factors that lead young people to commit to social and political causes is relevant for thinking how to foster civic engagement. Previous studies (Martínez, Silva, & Hernández, 2010) in Chile report that youth perceive their voice will not be heard and their participation will be ineffectual, factors that likely discourage their involvement. Thus, knowledge about the processes by which some youth develop commitment to civic causes is relevant. We focus on youth that have sustained social action over time to identify the factors that contributed to their decision to commit and to examine whether their trajectories follow similar or unique processes.

Adolescents are cognitively capable of placing themselves in historical context and to reflect on past events that shape the course of their narrative. Further, they can draw upon their past experiences and memories and articulate them into a coherent account of their personal history. These beliefs are captured through the narratives of their life stories as the latter convey different aspects of the self.

Method

Participants

Data is drawn from a larger study on youths' conceptions of citizenship and motivations for civic engagement. The sample consisted of 6 Chilean youth (3 ages 16–19; 3 ages 20–24 years) of diverse socioeconomic condition, with a history of 3–7 years of active participation in prosocial and political organizations. Purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) was used to recruit youth for voluntary participation in interviews. The sample comprised 4 females and 2 males. On average, participants were 19.5 years old, with 3 adolescents (19 years or less) and 3 young adults (20–24 years). At the time of the study, 5 participants were studying and 3 were also working part time. Based on parental education and area of residence, 3 participants came from low (secondary incomplete), 1 from middle (secondary complete), and 2 from upper-middle (professional) socioeconomic backgrounds.

Participants were contacted through different organizations that work with youth in Metropolitan Santiago. At the moment of the study 4 participants were involved in youth-led community groups or organizations and 2 in organizations that included adult facilitators as well. These organizations represented different cultural and ideological contexts and served diverse purposes, namely, advocacy for environmental protection (1), advocacy for the rights of indigenous people (1), grassroots political action in low income communities (1), social intervention with low income children and their families (2), students' rights and social action in a high-school student association (1).

Instrument

The in-depth interview script explored participants' accounts of their history of participation and the development of commitment to prosocial or political causes by inquiring about significant experiences and the meanings youth attached to their social action. Script questions included (1) If you think of your own life are there any experiences, situations, or persons that contributed to your interest and/or commitment to this organization or cause? (2) What motivated you to becoming involved with this organization or cause? (3) Can you describe the circumstances that led you to join this movement or organization? (4) What motives or circumstances have sustained your involvement over time? (5) What does being a citizen mean to you?

Youth are cognitively and socially mature to formulate their lives in narratives. In depth interviews yield narratives that convey contextualized knowledge that integrates persons, events, and places from the person's perspective. Thus narratives are suitable to capturing the meanings that the person attributes to the experience as well as to tie different characteristics of the individual into one person.

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