The value "social responsibility" as a motivating factor for adolescents' readiness to participate in different types of political actions, and its socialization in parent and peer contexts

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A B S T R A C T

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Based on a sample of tetrads ($N = 839$), including 16 year-old adolescents, their mothers, fathers, and same-sex friends, it was analyzed in which way the value social responsibility is related to adolescents' readiness for different types of political participation. Results showed that social responsibility was positively linked to readiness for participation in legal protest actions. No relationships with readiness for participation in federal elections or with readiness for participation in illegal protest actions occurred, and a negative relationship with readiness for participation in political violent actions was found. In a second step, the socialization of the value social responsibility in the parents and peer context was the focus. Value similarities between adolescents, their parents and friends, as well as other contextual factors were considered. Multiple regression analyses revealed differential effects for male and female adolescents. In male adolescents, authoritative parenting and political discussions with parents were positively linked to social responsibility. Furthermore, peer-group membership had a negative impact. For female adolescents, significant value similarities with their parents, especially with their mothers, occurred. Value similarities with their friend were found in both gender groups, but appeared to be higher in the female group. Also, in both gender groups, a positive parent–child relationship quality was linked to higher social responsibility. In sum, findings show that parents as well as peer contextual factors were contributing to the adolescents' value acquisition.

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In a cross-national study including seven countries, Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, and Sheblanova (1998) found that a family ethic that emphasizes social responsibility was one of the most consistent correlates – besides a sense of membership in school, democratic school practices and engagement in voluntary work – of adolescents' civic commitment between the ages of 12 and 18 years. By civic commitment, they referred to the importance adolescents attached to public interest as a personal life goal, which is a value orientation very similar to the one we measured in our study. The authors argued that parents may exert an influence over adolescents' value orientations by instructing their children and interpreting the world, and the relationship with others in the world, in their own values. They further found that family values not only relate to adolescents' civic commitment, but also to their political views, for example on poverty, unemployment and homelessness (Flanagan & Tucker, 1999).

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The present study will build on these findings, and at the same time, will enlarge the focus in different directions. First, we will look for the relevance adolescents' value orientation has for their readiness to participate in different types of political action, as well as for their political interest. The types of actions considered range from conventional to unconventional, and from legal, illegal, to violent political protest. Second, we did not use only adolescents' reports about their family ethics, but we also interviewed their parents, independently of each other, about their respective value orientations. This allows us an unbiased view onto the values of adolescents and their parents, as well as to analyze value transmission processes within families. Third, the assessment of value orientations was accompanied by a survey of the parenting style, and of adolescents' perceptions of some affective and cognitive characteristics of the parent–child relationship. This allows us a deeper insight into the processes underlying adolescents' value acquisition within the family context. Fourth, some measures of the peer context were included in the study, which enables us to follow the role of peers and to raise the question if there is an interplay between family and peers' context characteristics in the process of adolescents' value acquisition.

The value social responsibility as a key aspect of civic identity

Values are dispositions internalized by individuals and determining their thoughts and behaviors. They serve as standards to judge one's own as well as others' behaviors, and provide a basis for organizing political views and positions on public policies (Flanagan, 2003). For democratic societies it is crucial that young people develop "civic identities", i.e. identities comprising a specific conglomeration of (political) knowledge, (political) abilities, readiness for action, and democratic values. There is an ongoing debate about the question of what "civic" in contrast to "political" in the context of civic identity development exactly means; but beyond this debate there is consensus that a key aspect of civic identity is the ability and willingness to move beyond one's individual self-interest and to be committed to the well-being of some larger group of which one is a member (Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002). Social responsibility, the value focused upon in the present paper, represents the motivational basis for exactly this willingness.

In terms of Schwartz's (1992) conceptualization of values, social responsibility can be viewed as a self-transcending value (e.g. benevolence or universalism), as opposed to a self-enhancing value (e.g. hedonism, achievement, and power). According to Schwartz, universalism and benevolence are both concerned with the enhancement of others and the transcendence of selfish interest. However, while benevolence focuses on concern for the welfare of close others in everyday interaction, universalism is directed toward "understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection for the welfare of *all* people and for nature." (Schwartz, 1992, 12) Hence, in order to become a responsible citizen, the universalism values have to be developed, not the benevolence values, as the scope of benevolence values does not extend beyond particularistic relationships.

Social responsibility, as it was measured in our study, does not distinguish between a concern for the welfare of close others or for the welfare of all people and nature. However, in the German National Youth Survey (Hoffmann-Lange, 1995), from where the used value inventory derived, social responsibility was linked to what was called a high "public orientation", i.e. ascribing high importance to the fields of "politics" and of "art and culture", beyond the more private fields of "the own family", "friends", and "parents and siblings". A high "public orientation", in turn, was positively related to political interest and to political activities like signing petitions, attending demonstrations, and being a member of a citizens' initiative (Hoffmann-Lange, 1995). Therefore, it seems that social responsibility, as it was measured in our study, implies aspects of universalism in the sense of Schwartz' value conception.

The value social responsibility and adolescents' political participation

Sherrod et al. (2002) pointed out that prosocial and political behaviors should relate to each other, because both behaviors involve standing up for the interest and the welfare of others or the community. However, political behavior or participation can have different meanings. Voting in federal elections, for example, could be conceptualized by the adolescents as more of a good citizens' duty than as an action one exerts in the name of others or toward the welfare of the community. In contrast, legal protest actions like participating in a demonstration are often embedded in social movements following goals that go beyond selfish interests. Therefore, legal protest actions should be more clearly linked to a universalistic value like social responsibility. With illegal protest actions, for example stopping traffic with a demonstration or taking part in an illegal demonstration, the motivation is unclear. Illegal protest actions could be considered by the adolescents either as actions causing harm to the community, or as actions of "civil disobedience". Civil disobedience is commonly defined as non-violent resistance. Actions of civil disobedience usually imply breaking laws, but nevertheless can be morally justified if the goal of these actions is highly estimated from a democratic perspective (e.g. justice or human rights) and cannot be reached by means of other, legal forms of protest. Adolescents' readiness to take part in illegal protest actions should be motivated by a universalistic value like social responsibility only in the case where these actions are understood as civil disobedience and not as causing harm to the community. Otherwise, readiness to take part in illegal protest actions should not be linked to social responsibility, or could even be negatively related. The same is true for actions of political violence, like damaging street signs or hitting another person. Actions of political violence in most cases are not maintainable in terms of justice or human rights. Of interest is also the relationship between social responsibility and political interest. To the degree social responsibility, as it was measured in our study, represents a universalistic value, it should relate positively to the adolescents' political interest, as both concepts imply an awareness for public issues.