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What Motivates Youth Civic Involvement?

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Abstract

Though the topic of youth civic involvement is increasingly popular in social science research, the question of *why* some youth are civically involved while others are not is not yet well understood. In this paper, a developmental contextualist approach is used to address the following questions: What motivations do youth report for civic involvement? Do motivations differ across school contexts? A qualitative interview study using an in-depth semi-structured interview approach with 21 diverse youth was used to investigate questions concerned youth civic involvements and motivation. Interviews were coded using both theory-based content analysis methods and open coding in an iterative coding process. Results suggest five categories of motivations and two categories of de-motivators that emerged from youth reports of their reasons for civic involvement. There is variation in levels, types, and motivations for youth civic involvement both across and within groups with similar school contexts. An emergent finding is that civic motivations likely differ from motivations for other youth involvements. Implications are that civic motivations need to be understood in context and such understanding points to new insights regarding how opportunities can be structured to better facilitate civic involvement.

Recently, a high school teacher-in-training told me a story about students at her high school, concluding with amazement "Wow. These people care about the world!" These students started a program to raise awareness about poverty in the developing world and addressing global poverty through micro-loans. One of the events they organized to fundraise featured students living on $2.50 per day for one week, sleeping at their school to avoid costs of transportation. This is a dramatic example of student social awareness and civic action, but such examples and more subtle forms of youth civic involvement happen every day across the country and the world. What compels youth toward such civic action?

Research emphasizes the social contexts (family values, peer groups, civic opportunities), demographic characteristics (race, gender, age, SES, immigrant status), and knowledge and skills (civic classes, leadership skills) that help explain youth civic involvement. However, very little research has addressed *why* these factors constrain or facilitate civic development. To do so requires focusing on how youth make sense of these experiences and characteristics. Civic development is a social process situated in micro-contexts, the local contexts in which young people have concrete experiences that inform their developing identities. Motivations are a way of understanding how youth makes sense of experiences in these micro-contexts in ways that compel them toward or turn them off from civic involvement.

Youth Civic Involvement

The success of democratic societies depends on whether, and how, citizens choose to engage with others in social organizations, take collective action, and work towards goals that will benefit society (e.g., Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

Although it is not always clear which actions benefit society, it is clearly desirable for democracy to have a society in which citizens actively engage with others to grapple with civic issues. In addition to benefiting society, civic involvement confers political benefits to individuals such as ensuring that one's own interests are represented in political processes (Flanagan, 2008) as well as psychological benefits such as fostering positive feelings such as empowerment and connection with others (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). Though some indicators suggest that young people in America are disengaged from civic life, other indicators point to increases in youth civic involvement (Lopez et al., 2006).

Because of the importance of civic engagement for society, the potential of such engagement for youth development, and fear that young Americans are not being properly integrated into public life, the topic of civic development is increasingly on the research agenda for political scientists, sociologists, educators, and psychologists. It is especially relevant to study such development during adolescence, an important time of identity formation during which individuals explore their role in relation to society (Erikson, 1968; Yates & Youniss, 1996). Despite debate about what counts as civic engagement and although political activity and volunteerism are theoretically distinct (Walker, 2000; 2002; Perry & Katula, 2001), a broad definition of "civic" is commonly used to include both activity types, especially when examining youth as they have fewer opportunities for directly political involvement (Flanagan, 2008). I will use this inclusive definition of "civic." Also, many scholars use the term "civic engagement" to refer to a broad construct that includes civic skills, knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and goals and there are numerous definitions for this term. I will use "civic involvement" to refer more specifically to the activities that youth participate in that are civic in nature defined using criteria that emerge from existing research (explained in the method section). Scholarship on youth civic

engagement provides many insights about the level and nature of such involvement; however, many open questions remain regarding what leads to youth civic involvement.

Theoretical Framework

The dominant theory informing my approach to this issue is the developmental contextualist perspective (Adams et al., 1994; Lerner, 1995). I use this approach to argue that the appropriate unit of analysis for understanding youth civic development is the person-in-context. As Adams and Marshall (1996) explain, "In a developmental contextualist perspective, attention is given to the study of the individuals' psychological processes and to the meaning of these processes within the social, physical, and economic contexts in which they function." Civic development is socially embedded. Understanding it requires examining internal psychological processes, such as motivation, as both the culmination of past experiences in specific contexts and as a source of action and future experience. Elements of the person-in-context approach are used in much civic development research though recent research emphasizes the context. By examining motivation, thought of as an internal source of action constructed by individuals as they make meaning of various experiences, I hope to add a new perspective about what drives youth civic involvement. I examine motivation in the context of schools to explore how person level and contextual variables interact with regards to youth civic involvement. Motivation is seen as both an individual and a socially embedded psychological process. To draw fully on a developmental systems model would require studying civic development over time attending to bi-directional effects between person and context. However, the current study is not meant to test a developmental contextualist model; rather, the influence of this model is theoretical and the present study is meant to generate hypotheses. As Lerner (2002) explains "Young people and their communities are involved in a bidirectional relationship

wherein community assets are both a product and a producer of the actions of engaged young people" (Lerner, 2002, pp. 26). This study explores the nature of this bidirectional relationship between community and school contexts and motivations for youth civic involvement.

Existing approaches to understanding youth civic involvement: A missing piece

Recent scholarship from various disciplines investigates the topic of youth civic involvement. Most research focuses on the effect various types of civic activities (volunteering as a tutor, door-to-door campaigning, or attending a rally) on later civic outcomes (social attitudes and voting behavior). Overall, youth participation in various activities is associated with later civic outcomes (e.g., Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995) but the type, amount, and quality of participation is associated differentially with various outcomes (e.g., Flanagan, Gill, & Gallay, 2005; Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Metz & Youniss 2005; Reinders & Youniss, 2006; Taylor & Pancer, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1996).

Existing research provides a basis for understanding the many characteristics, contexts, and conditions that lead to or prevent youth civic involvement. Some scholars addressing precursors to civic involvement suggest that demographic characteristics such as age, race, SES, citizenship status, and gender are important in predicting civic involvement (e.g., Cemalcilar, 2009; Foster-Bey, 2008, Levinson 2007). Others show how social attitudes or dispotistions are predictors of civic involvement (e.g., Cemalcilar, 2009; Matsuba, Hart, & Atkins, 2007). Some researchers emphasize the importance of political and civic knowledge and skills as a necessary precursor to civic engagement (Della Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2000) although such knowledge is not sufficient to predict civic involvement and certainly doesn't guarantee or explain involvement. Contexts such as culture (Yates & Youniss, 1999), family (Wray-Lake, 2008), peer group (Youniss, McLellan, & Mazer, 2001), neighborhood (Atkins & Hart, 2003;

Hart & Kirshner, 2009) and school (Levinson, 2009; Torney-Purta,2002) are all important for predicting levels and types of youth civic involvement. Within these contexts, certain conditions facilitate or constrain civic involvement; most prominently documented, the level of opportunities presented by schools and neighborhoods is a key condition predicting youth involvement (Youniss & Levine, 2009).

Adolescents form civic commitments through experiences in social and community institutions, as many scholars have suggested (e.g. Flanagan, 2003; Hart & Kirshner, 2009; Kahne & Middaugh, 2009). Such research correctly locates the issue of civic development in social contexts. However, this research leaves out the perspective of motivation. Often, youth are thought to be motivated primarily by extrinsic rewards (e.g., Flanagan, 2009) such as building a resume. Or, emphasis is on how motivations change through civic involvement rather than what motivates youth in the first place. Prominent suggestions for facilitating youth civic involvement focus on how adults in social institutions can structure opportunities to invite youth into civic life (e.g. Flanagan, 2009; Youniss & Levine, 2009). This may be particularly important for youth who are on the low end of the "civic achievement gap" (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009; Levinson, 2007; 2010): the documented difference in youth civic involvement across socio-economic, racial, and ethnic groups in which poorer, minority, and non-college bound youth are less civically involved than wealthier, White, and college-bound youth (Levinson, 2007). Whether directed at specific or broad groups of youth, the idea that society must provide meaningful opportunities for youth engagement pervades civic research.

Motivation

Although much of the research reviewed above on youth civic development is concerned generally with issues of how and why young people become civically involved, this research

lacks direct investigation of motivations for civic involvement among youth. In their conclusion

to a special issue on the topic of youth civic development, Sherrod, Flanagan, and Youniss

(2002) offer some potential motivations for youth civic involvement. They suggest that:

> "there are three reasons for youth to be politically active: for the satisfaction that comes
> from doing good work and helping others, acknowledging that there is individual
> variability in how motivating this can be; for the sense of collective efficacy and impact
> that can come from involvement; and, finally, to contribute to a set of shared values in the
> country so that one feels at home rather than out of place."

 These are three outcomes often associated with civic involvement; however, they have not been

tested directly as motivations for such involvement.

Though *civic* motivations are understudied, research in related fields provides insights

about potential motivations for civic involvement. For example, much research is devoted to

understanding motivational change through extracurricular activity involvement (e.g. Fredricks,

et al. 2002) such as in youth organizations (e.g., Pearce & Larson, 2006). These studies suggest

that youth are motivated toward extracurricular and organization activities by the opportunity to

meet certain need, for example, showing or gaining competence and making or retaining social

connections (Fredericks et al., 2002). This literature focuses on initial extrinsic motivations that

develop into intrinsic motivations through organizational involvement. In fact, every young

person in Pearce and Larson's (2006) study reported being motivated to join a youth activism

organization in order to obtain community service hour credit, though many of their motivations

changed over the course of participation, a process refereed to by Colby and Damon (1992) as

transformation of goals. Though such extrinsic motivations for civic involvements certainly

exist, what other motivations exist?

A related body of literature from public administration research addresses the topic of

what motivates adults toward public service. Perry and colleagues (1990; 1997; 2008) suggest a

construct called public service motivation (PSM) as a disposition leading some individuals to public service. They argue that motives for such work are often rational, norm-based, affective, or a mix (Perry & Wise, 1990). Similar to youth civic engagement literature, some suggested antecedents to PSM include family socialization, religion, gender, income level, and earlier volunteer experiences (Perry, Brundey, Coursey, & Littlepage, 2008). Investigating volunteerism specifically, Penner (2003) offers that personality traits and religiosity influence volunteer behavior and that these dispositions interact with experiences, such as organizational values and practices, to form and sustain civic involvements through role-formation. Such research points to the importance of recognizing internal motivations for civic involvement such as public service jobs and volunteerism, however such work focuses on adult civic involvement.

The literature informs the investigation of youth civic motivations but doesn't address the issue directly. Much of the literature reviewed above focuses on *adults* and not youth (e.g., Penner, 2003; Perry, 1990; 1997), on motivational *change over time* and not on initial motivations (e.g., Fredricks et al. 200; Pearce & Larson, 2006), or does not address motivations for *civic* involvement specifically (e.g., Pearce & Larson, 2006; Penner, 2003; Perry 1990). Scholars interested in understanding what drives *civic* involvement lean toward understanding levels of youth civic involvement that rely on factors external to youth. Asking why youth are and are not civically involved is seen by some as setting up a dynamic of blaming young people for trends of decreasing civic involvement when the onus should be on society as a whole (e.g., Youniss & Levine, 2009).

Creating civic opportunities for youth is a very important approach for increasing youth civic involvement. However, what is missing from this emphasis on providing more opportunities to youth is an understanding of what motivates youth to become civically involved

initially-- to accept these invitations into civic life. Further, what explains variation in civic

involvement within groups who have similar opportunities for involvement? The present study

adds to existing literature on youth civic involvement by using a qualitative approach with a

diverse sample of youth to explore motivations for civic involvements. The first question

addressed is:

> (1) What motivations do youth report for their civic involvements and what motivates
>
> some youth, but not others, toward civic involvement?

And, given that civic development in situated in social contexts and institutions and considering

the existing research showing the importance of school context particularly (e.g., Levinson,

2010), the second research question of the present study is:

> (2) Do youth-reported motivations vary in meaningful ways across school context (when
>
> context is defined by features such as the material resources and civic opportunities
>
> available to students)?

Method

Qualitative approaches are useful to generate hypotheses in an understudied domain

(Patton, 1990). Because relatively little is understood about why some youth choose to become

involved in civic activities while other youth do not, exploring motivations for youth civic

involvement through a qualitative study provides rich information from youth about civic

motivations how these motivations relate to school context. This exploratory method will

provide direction for future research on civic development as well as information for educators,

mentors, and parents interested in fostering youth civic involvement.

Jahromi   Civic Motivations Draft

Participants

Two interviewers conducted a series of interviews (N = 21) with youth between the ages of 15 and 18. The youth came from four schools that were chosen because of the diverse populations they serve. In an effort to investigate motivations from youth at schools on both ends of the "civic opportunity gap," (e.g., Levinson, 2007) we choose schools based on the diversity of students served. There are many ways that the "civic gap" is discussed by researchers (by socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, college-bound versus non-college bound, and immigrant versus native born) and no clear consensus regarding which best defines this gap. However, because of the demographic characteristics of the Bay Area, California, where these data were collected, diversity and immigrant status are not good indicators of who would be at the high versus low end of the civic gap because of the number of immigrants and differences between the experiences of various immigrant groups in this area. So, while we were targeting ethnic and immigrant status diversity in order to understand motivations among diverse youth, in our particular sample, diversity and level of resources across schools were not necessarily indicators low civic opportunities (though they often are in previous research). Thus, when assessing which schools are highly-resourced and low-resourced, a variety of indicators were used such as: the number of students who go to college from each school, physical resources and monetary support, type of diversity served, geographic location, and the social problems of the school reported by students and school personnel (see Table 2 for brief school profiles).

Our sampling approach was to ask a contact person at each school (either the principal, an administrative assistant to the principal, or a school counselor) to help choose 4-5 seniors from each school for us to interview. We provided them with a very basic description of our study. We asked our contact to identify one student who was heavily involved in civic activities

(loosely following the "exemplar" approach; see Colby & Damon, 1992; Damon, 2008; Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001). The four-five others were chosen relatively at random (we didn't use a formal randomization technique but we asked our contact to choose students at random). We believe that one school chose several highly involved students on purpose, so we asked to interview three additional students at this school who were not as civically involved so that we could get a comparative picture of levels of involvement within the school. We wanted to interview youth from diverse ethnic backgrounds so this was also considered in recruitment. Our final sample of interviews consisted of mostly high school seniors (ages 17-18) and three students in grades 9-11. Five of the 22 youth were not born in the USA and thirteen had at least one parent who was not born in the USA. For a summary of demographics, see Table 1.

Interview Procedure

After following appropriate consent and assent procedures, interviews were conducted between November and December of 2009. We used an in-depth semi-structured approach to interviewing and each interview took between 45 minutes and two hours, with most lasting one hour. The interview was developed, piloted, and practiced through multiple iterations by our research team before being used in the field. This process allowed us to refine the protocol, increase the reliability across interviews and reduce interviewer bias. Team research sessions included discussion about technical issues such as using recording equipment as well as substantial issues such as establishing rapport and asking probing questions effectively.

Interviews were conducted by two interviewers who used a script of open-ended questions followed by probing questions. The interview script consisted of three main sections. In the first section were interested in identity: we asked how the interviewee would describe

him/herself, probing their descriptions of groups they identify with and especially asking about

ethnic identity and connection to communities such as school or neighborhood. An example

question is "To get started, can you tell me a little bit about yourself? What are some things that

are really important to you?" In the second section we were interested in civic motivation and

action. We asked about whether the interviewees about their civic involvements. For example,

we asked "Has there ever been anything at your school that you thought should change? Did you

have the opportunity to do something about it?" In the third section we were interested in ideas

and beliefs about the US government, concepts such as citizenship and American values such as

justice and equality. We asked open-ended questions about their thoughts on a variety of topics

and probed them to discuss reasons for their ideas and their own personal experiences. For

example, we asked "In a democracy, all people are considered equal. What does equality mean

to you?" followed by questions about their experiences with equality and inequality.

Analysis

Our research team went through a series of steps to identify the themes that emerged

from this set of interviews, to create a coding system, and to draw conclusions from these data.

In analyzing these interviews, we were driven by general research questions regarding the nature

of youth civic motivation, but we aimed to capture the themes and ideas that emerged in the

words of our respondents. To meet these goals, our research team used both theory-based content

analysis methods (Weber, 1990) and open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We used an

iterative process of reading interview transcripts, identifying themes, and meeting to discuss how

the themes related to our research questions and hypotheses. During an initial pass through the

interviews, five coders looked for quotes that spoke to very broad categories related to our

research questions, such as: civic actions, motivations, important identity characteristics, and

ideas about American values. Each coder developed an independent list of data points from the

interviews for each category of interest, and from these lists the team developed themes that

showed new ways to understand relationships between identity, civic involvements, and

motivation among young people. We repeated these steps through a series of four research

meetings before we came up with our final categories of motivations. Finally, three coders

independently coded for each participant's level of involvement (highly, somewhat, low, none;

see Table 1) and primary, secondary and third type of motivation (Table 3). Additionally, each

coder made a list of each type of involvement mentioned and any barriers to involvement.

Results

Overall, youth varied widely in the extent of their civic involvement, the forms their

involvement took, and the motivations they reported. Five categories of motivations emerged

from these interviews and several types of barriers to civic involvement also emerged. Results

are organized by the categories of motivations that emerged: issue-driven, beliefs/values, making

an impact, self-goals, pressure or response to invitation. I describe the type of motivation, give

examples, and then relate the motivation to types and levels of involvement before commenting

on the contexts in which each motivation was more prominent. The discussion section integrates

results with analysis and interpretation of how these results help us understand youth civic

motivations in context and how these results can be applied to facilitate youth civic involvement.

Categories of Motivation

Issue-driven. Youth in this group describe becoming motivated for civic involvement

primarily by passion about a specific issue or a cause that is personally relevant. Involvements

seem to be in response to needs identified in their community or personal issues that affect them

in specific ways. These motivations varied in terms of how personal and how dramatic the

issues were, but the participant became involved in civic activities in response to an issue that

was personally meaningful and specific.

Some examples of issues that led to civic involvement were local political issues such as

police brutality and personal concerns such as the threat of one's sports team being discontinued

due to funding. One youth was moved to protest police brutality after having a family member

shot by the police,

> "…it was called "Stop the Violence" And we walked downtown from, I think, North
>
> River, to downtown through Caryland and all that. We walked through there…I didn't
>
> know [name of victim], but the fact that he got killed by an officer, that just made me
>
> want to do it. Because the police killed my cousin, so every time I have a way of getting
>
> in a protest that got to do with an officer, I'm there. 105"

Two other youth became civically involved when they were faced with the possibility that their

water polo team might not receive funding; they were compelled to join together to write letters

and attend school board meetings. One of these youth said "…the school board recently was

talking about shutting down the pool for water polo. And I had to go to some of the school board

meetings to protest that. 108" Through his passion for water polo, he became involved in a

variety of civic activities to combat the threat of losing his team.

These issue-driven youth tended not to be engaged in a high number of civic

involvements; rather, they were deeply involved in one or two activities of personal relevance.

They tended to be somewhat involved, though some were highly involved, and the types of

involvements associated with this motivation category were often political in nature (e.g.,

protesting, attending political group meetings, petitioning) though the type of involvement also

seemed to depend on the context and what types of opportunities were available to youth.   The

majority of young people interviewed who were motivated by an issue were from the less

resourced schools with fewer civic opportunities. For some youth, the initial motivation was

personal but through their exposure to civic processes, they became involved in other activities

while for others, their involvement only centered on the personal issue and did not lead to

interest in other issues.

Beliefs/values. Youth in this group described their motivations in terms of generalized

beliefs that civic involvement is important. These beliefs were usually not reliant on a passionate

connection to their particular civic involvements. Rather, the particular issues were not nearly as

important as the fact that they were acting on beliefs. Examples typical of this type of motivation

include expressions of personal commitment to give back "I really like to give back to my

community, and it's something that I've been kind of doing mainly since freshman year. 102" as

well as beliefs in general social responsibility: "I do [feel that I have responsibilities as a citizen]

because everybody does, I feel like we have to do our part in our community, and our

community does their part in our state, and it just goes on to our whole country.109"

The youth who expressed belief motivations tended to be highly involved, though some

were somewhat involved. They seemed to seek proactively multiple opportunities for

involvement. These youth were generally from the highly resourced school contexts though there

were youth in the less resourced schools who were driven by beliefs. Belief-driven youth in the

lower resourced schools usually conveyed belief motivations in combination with issue-driven

motivations while this was not true for youth in the more highly resourced schools.

Jahromi   Civic Motivations Draft

Most of the youth who expressed beliefs systems with regards to civic involvement were highly involved. There was one exception though, a young man who reported being un-involved in civic activities for ideological reasons. He explained:

> "I'm doing a writing assignment right now about morality and [unclear] ideas on selfishness…And in a way, I kind of agree with that – that people should look out for themselves first and not necessarily others, and that it's OK to put yourself first and be entirely concerned with yourself, and that shouldn't be looked down upon as selfish, or even if it is called selfish, the word 'selfish' or 'greedy' shouldn't be too frowned upon…I have [acted upon this belief] because I feel so strongly about it. Mainly, just the amount of times I've been asked to help others, and when I'm asked to help do a project in leadership, I have to think, 'Well, do I have time for that?' And I sometimes feel bad about saying, 'No, I don't have the time for that,' even though, to me, I'm doing the best for myself. 114"

This young man reports a belief system attached to his un-involvement. Though he does participate in student government, he generally believes that doing what is best for himself is important and so he limits the amount other-oriented activities he participates in.

Positive contribution/have an impact. Youth reporting this motivation were driven by the general idea of making a difference. This is not issue specific but reflects a more general desire to contribute positively to one's community in some way. This is like the beliefs/values category in that it is a generalized motivation but this category of motivation expresses a lower level, or less specified belief. Youth who had these motivations seem to have reflected less on what exactly it means or have less specific ideas about how to make their desired contribution compared to the beliefs/values motivation in which people wanted to have a positive impact

specifically through civic means. This could be in response to negative things they had seen or were aware of or could be a more general desire to make a difference in the world.

Several of the youth mentioned this as one of their motivations for civic involvement. For some, this was in response to negative things they had seen or were aware of:

> "And I want to do something to create the pool. I want to make a better environment around the pool 'cause we don't have stands or anything. Like the stands are like far off. You can't even watch the game. So I wanna like maybe build bleachers or something. I just wanna make the place better, the pool deck. 110"

The youth who cited this motivation were somewhat involved in civic activity, though some were highly involved. There was a wide range of types of involvement associated with this motivation as youth seemed to have different ideas about the best way for them to make an impact on their given communities and different opportunities for involvement. There was no clear pattern of this motivation associated with certain context; youth from both resourced and under resourced schools reported this as a motivation. Though the type of involvement seems opportunity and context dependent, this motivation category seems to reflect a developmentally less formed motivation for involvement.

Self-goals. These youth seem motivated toward civic involvement by personal goals or self-interests. They expressed a range of goals related to self-enhancement in some way, for example, personal development, preparing for their future, gaining skills or knowledge, building a resume, or becoming informed. This category is closest to the idea of extrinsic motivation, though these motivations were always present in combination with other-oriented motivations

(such as beliefs or issues pertaining to others) so it is difficult to tease apart which is the primary motivator and these should not be considered exclusively extrinsic.

One category of self-goal motivations that emerged was the desire to prepare for the future. For some, this motivation stemmed from a general sense of the importance of civic and political participation but coupled with a feeling or being too young to have a serious impact. Others were more specifically focused on civic involvement as instrumental for future goals such as going to college. For example, "Me and my friends were – kinda wanted to start on summer programs for college, so we looked around, and then she told me about it. 120." This particular student reported that certain experiences would help build her college resume, but she was also aware that she could grow as a person through such experiences. When asked by her interviewer "So initially, it was for college, you wanted to get some experiences like that?" she answered "Yeah, and also for myself, as well, too – learn and grow to become a better person. 120" For others, the motivation was future oriented was more generally to learn and practice skills and to get informed about issues in order to serve as a good citizen as an adult. For example,

> "Well, I can't vote yet, but when I get that opportunity, I think it's important. It gives everyone the opportunity to have a say in the government. Of course, you've got to be educated. You have to pay attention and know what you're talking about, know what they're dealing with, the policies…every US citizen should have the knowledge about what's going on in the real world and just contribute or else democracy won't work. 110"

Others expressed a belief in the importance of civic involvement for personal development. For example,

"It's really an opportunity for me to– it started off as more personal, like being able to

develop as a leader, being able to be exposed to different types of knowledge, different

types of people, because basically what it is, it's kind of a really well-rounded

organization in the fact that there's competitive events, but then there's also a community

service side of it, and in addition to that, there's workshops. There's a lot of interaction

with business professionals, so it's a really professional experience in that sense. 103 "

The students who were motivated by self-goals usually were also motivated by beliefs or

issues and they tended to be highly involved in activities such as political youth organizations,

and service-oriented summer internships and youth programs. These youth were primarily from

the schools with more resources as well as more civic opportunities, though there were youth in

the lower-resourced contexts who reported self-goal motivations.

Many of the youth reporting self-goals as one of their motivations also expressed that

their goals changed through their civic involvements. This concept, which Colby and Damon

(1992) call transformation of goals, is well documented in youth civic involvement literature and

provides compelling support for the notion that getting youth involved, for any reason, has

positive implications on their civic development (e.g. Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997).

Response to pressure/invitation. A small number of youth reported being motivated for

civic involvement in response to an invitation or pressure from others. Examples of this include:

helping a friend, being asked by a teacher, or feeling pressured by parents. Youth reporting this

motivation were not necessarily connected to the specific issue and didn't express beliefs that

involvement it is important, rather, someone asked for their help and so they got involved.

One youth mentioned that he participated in a fundraiser to "help out a friend. 119" but did not elaborate at all on a connection to the importance of the involvement. Another youth responded to a speaker at her school:

> "Well, I did do – I did this one thing where we went door-to-door and we informed people about how to save energy and how to become more green…There was a speaker came to our school, and she told us about it, and then she asked for volunteers to help out with that. 112"

These youth were not particularly attached to an issue and did not express any ideology attached to their participation. They participated in a civic activity because someone asked them to. Interestingly, these youth did not report the same transformation of goals through their civic involvement that youth with self goals reported. Perhaps responding to requests doesn't lead to the same level of commitment to civic involvements as other motivations. Or, this might be because the youth in the present study who reported this motivation happened to become involved in one-time events rather than in an organization. Indeed, in other research, responding to invitations is associated with transformation of goals.

Those youth who reported this response-motivation as their primary source of motivation tended to be coded as uninvolved, though one was somewhat involved. Because we did not ask the youth directly if someone had ever asked them to participate in a civic activity, it is likely that this motivation is under-represented in the present data. Indeed other research suggests that many young people become civically involved through responding to requests of others (e.g. Flanagan, 2009). However, in our sample of youth, this motivation did not come out prominently as a motivation for youth civic involvement.

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Barriers as De-motivators

While coding the five motivation categories above, we also attended to barriers to civic involvement that youth talked about as decreasing their motivation for civic involvement. Both motivation and structural barriers were evidence. Motivational barriers such as lack of interest and feelings of complacency were especially evidence for youth in highly resourced schools while youth in low resourced schools discussed barriers that are both motivational and structural such as feelings of disempowerment or lack of knowledge/opportunity.

Motivational barriers. Among the reasons for civic un-involvement reported by youth, some seemed to express the flip side of the motivational categories reviewed above, such as lack of specific issue of interest, or complacency, the belief that things are fine without civic participation. Many of the uninvolved youth reported that they did not take part in civic activities because it was not a priority for them considering their other commitments. Another motivational barrier was a sense of complacency, or the thought that things are fine so civic involvement was unnecessary. For example, one young man reported "I don't really see anything in my community that I don't like. It's a safe neighborhood. There's not lots of crime" and went to say that some problems he knows about don't relate to him "Because I don't think I'm personally aware of what it's like to live without healthcare. I can't relate to what it's like without healthcare, so I don't see to the extent of how big of a deal it is. 119"

Most of the uninvolved youth reported barriers explaining their involvement indicating that they see the value in civic involvement even if they did not participate in civic activities for various reasons. However, as discussed above, some of the uninvolved or somewhat involved youth chose not to participate in civic activities for purposeful reasons such as beliefs in the

importance of taking care of oneself. Also, though youth who reported barriers were largely

"uninvolved" in civic life, though some of the involved youth reported that they would be more

involved if they had time

> "I think it's kind of a time thing. I just don't wanna overload, so to speak, but I guess I'm doing my part, as much as I can do. And I'm not much of a political person, so to speak. I like to look into politics, and write about it, but that's as much as it interests me.102"

Interestingly, though this was a young involved young person, she described a barrier to more

political forms of civic involvement by commenting that she is not that type of person. When

asked to explain, she reported:

> "I'm timid. I would never be able to lead a group on that large of a scale, so to speak or I don't know if I would be able to take the responsibility…I don't know how to explain it, but stereotypically, we just see leaders as strong, charismatic individuals, and I just have never really thought about myself like that 102"

Youth who are civically involved at different levels report a variety of barriers keeping them

from participating more or from participating in other types of activities, or from participating at

all.

Structural barriers. Barriers such as lack of opportunities are well documented in other

research. Youth in this study did report such barriers as well as other structural barriers such as

lack of time, knowledge, and opportunities. Through these interviews, it is clear that such

structural barriers are not simple roadblocks to civic involvement by being insurmountable

obstacles, rather, such barriers are perceived by youth as convincing reasons why their

participation is unwelcome or futile. In other words, it is not simply that opportunities are

missing; it is that youth perceive the lack of opportunities available to them as evidence that they

cannot, or should not, bother with civic involvement. This is very de-motivating.

Many youth report not having time for civic involvement, while others youth wish they could become involved but don't know how. For example, "I can't – there's things around that I see that I wish were better, but I wouldn't really know how to make them better.107" This young woman doesn't know where to begin to address problems she sees in her community. Others feel that youth are too young to influence civic life, "I don't think there's much a minor can do 114" so that there is no point in trying.

One type of barrier that straddles the labels of motivational and structural are feelings of disempowerment. For example when asked about taking certain civic actions, one young woman reported "No, 'cause they ain't gonna listen to me, so I'm not about to waste my breath on people that ain't gonna listen. Or they might sit there and listen but ain't gonna do nothing about it.104" This disempowerment was more evident in interviews of youth from the schools with fewer resources, but certainly was expressed by youth at the highly resourced schools also.

Discussion

Results are discussed with regards to the two major research questions of the present study. I offer conclusions and implications, discuss limitations of the study, and provide directions for future research.

Youth Motivations for Civic Involvement

The first research question of the present study was: What motivations do youth report for their civic involvements and what motivates some youth, but not others, toward civic involvement? Five categories emerged that capture different motivations for civic involvement. The most common primary motivators were beliefs, self goals, and issues. Though the primary motivations of each youth were relatively clear from the language and anecdotes the youth

discussed, the motivations are somewhat related and certainly occur in combination. Youth are likely motivated to civic action by more than one drive.

The second question of this research relates motivations to school context (defined by specific features of schools: level of material resources and civic opportunities) by asking: Do youth-reported motivations vary across school context? Given existing research suggesting that level of opportunities for youth to participate in civic life will lead to higher levels civic involvement, we expected youth in the more highly resourced schools (who have many civic opportunities) would be more highly civically involved on the whole compared to those from under-resourced schools (with fewer opportunities for civic involvement). Indeed, this is what we find. The youth from the highly resourced schools reported more opportunities to become involved in civic action, for example, through school clubs and exposure to community opportunities. This supports the suggestions of literature that having opportunities for action is an important factor explaining youth civic action (e.g., Flanagan, 2008; Levine & Youniss, 2009).

However, as suspected, there was also variation in the levels of civic involvement within each group of youth interviewed from the two sets of schools. Two approaches are helpful to understand motivations for civic involvement beyond the opportunities available to youth. First, looking at general motivation patterns by levels of civic involvement *across* the groups helps understand if and how motivations vary by contexts. Second, looking at variation *within* each context helps answer the question, given similar opportunities for civic involvement, what motivations differentiate youth who are civically involved from those who are not?

Looking at these findings by comparing the motivations across groups for highly involved and uninvolved youth reveals differences in civic motivations in different contexts.

Most of the highly or semi involved youth from the highly resourced schools expressed beliefs

and values motivating their civic involvement. It is not possible to discern from this study

whether this is due to features of the schools, communities, or families of students at these

schools; however, it seems that youth in these two schools were being socialized to believe, for

various reasons, in the importance of civic involvement. For some, this came from beliefs about

"giving back" and "contributing to community" while for others, the emphasis was on preparing

for the future role of citizen.

In contrast, on average, the highly or semi engaged youth from the lower-resourced

schools were motivated by specific issues and not generalized beliefs about civic involvement.

These youth seemed to be reacting to personal situations or to problems they identified in their

community. Research is beginning to amass documenting programs, especially with youth in

lower resourced contexts, that capitalize on youth reactions to civic reality and channel such

reactions into civic involvement. Flanagan (2009) offers that "these projects harness young

people's frustrations and direct their anger toward social change, often targeting basic needs for

textbooks and transportation or tolerance in schools and communities."

This suggests that the motivations for civic involvement are likely different based on

demographic and contextual characterizes. That youth civic involvement takes different forms

for various groups of youth is explored in other literature (e.g., Flanagan, 2008; Kirshner,

Strobel, and Fernández, 2003; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002; Sherrod, Flanagan, Kassimir, &

Syvertsen, 2005) and the present study suggests that motivations also differ according to various

contexts of youth development. Indeed, motivation may be a way of understanding *why* these

demographic characteristics predict different levels of civic involvement. This relates to the well

documented "civic gap" between higher and lower SES youth. The most prominent current

suggestion in the civic literature is that more opportunities are needed to invite all youth, but especially lower SES youth, into civic life (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009; Levinson, 2007, Youniss & Levine, 2009). However, I offer that to close the civic gap, it is necessary to attend not only to opportunity differences but also to the potential differences in what motivates youth in different contexts and to explore the relationship between opportunities and motivations for all youth as well as for subsets of youth across various contexts.

It is also revealing to look *within* school contexts to examine patterns of youth civic motivations. For example, it is illustrative to look at the "unexpected cases" of youth who were highly involved despite few opportunities and youth who were uninvolved despite high levels of resources and civic opportunities. This reveals that beyond the level of opportunities youth have, beliefs and passions distinguish who is civically involved and who is not. In the schools with many civic opportunities such as numerous civic clubs and community partnerships, youth who remained uninvolved reported neither beliefs about the importance of civic involvement nor passions about a specific issue. Providing additional opportunities is clearly not enough engage these young people in civic life. What is needed to increase their civic involvement is endorsement of general beliefs regarding civic involvement or for their passions to be stirred by an interesting and personally meaningful issue. Youth can be encouraged to form beliefs about, for example, the importance of: giving back, representing one's culture, or preparing for productive citizenship. Such beliefs are likely slow to develop and might require concerted effort from various sources. But, beliefs can be promoted by parents, educators, other adult mentors, and peers in several ways. For example, exposure to heterogeneous points of view on social and political issues (Flanagan, 2008) and to controversial issues (Hess, 2009) might stir interest in forming civic beliefs.   Cultural group identification can be a powerful source of civic

beliefs (e.g. Jensen, 2008). In the classroom, emphasis on important civic actors and groups

throughout history who fought for moral and civic ideals (Payne, 2003) and emphasis on

identifying social needs and acquiring the skills to address them (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003)

might convey beliefs in the importance of active citizenship.

Youth can also be encouraged to find specific issues about which they are passionate

(e.g., Flanagan, 2008; Sherrod, 2003). This requires skilled mentors to be attuned to sparks of

interest youth show that might be nurtured into action (e.g., Damon, 2008). Both beliefs and

passions are internal sources of motivation that, when more fully understood, can be tapped into

to increase youth civic involvement. These recommendations for understanding and targeting

these motivational dimensions can work in concert with recommendations for structuring more

civic opportunities for youth. To engage youth effectively, opportunities can be provided in

ways that capitalize on existing youth motivations.

Initial motivations versus sustaining motivations

An important them that came up for youth who were highly and semi involved across

school contexts was the idea that initial motivations are often different from motivations which

sustain civic action. This process, called transformation of goals (Colby & Damon, 1992) was

evident in many of these youth interviews across contexts. Many youth reported becoming

involvement in civic activities initially as a response to pressure from others or in the service of

self-goals; however, many reported that they then discovered their enjoyment or perceived that

they were doing something important through their civic action. This process has been discussed

elsewhere and is certainly reason for providing youth with civic opportunities. Future work

investigating motivations for civic action should attend to both initial motivations and sustaining

motivations and the process by which motivations are transformed. It is also relevant to note that self-goals are not bad reasons for civic involvement. Such involvement motivated by self-goals is not necessarily less meaningful than involvement motivated by other reasons. However, self-goals alone might not sustain involvement if involvement stops after goals are met. Also self-goals were often motivations in combination with beliefs of issues. In other words, motivations are not mutually exclusive and many include some component of self-related goals.

Civic involvement meets a unique adolescent need

Another interesting idea regarding youth motivations for civic involvement emerged from these data: Motivations for civic involvement seem to differ from motivations for other extracurricular activities in important ways. Many of the youth who were highly involved in civic activities from these interviews were motivated by beliefs and issues. Specific motivations for other extracurricular involvements include gaining or showing competence, fulfilling social needs, and making a contribution (Fredricks et al. 2002). These might exist for civic involvements also, but youth might be motivated for civic involvement in some cases by an additional need: the need to enact, refine, or find one's worldview.

Indeed, adolescence is commonly thought of as time of idealism. Civic involvement may provide an outlet for, connection to, or source of idealistic worldview. In this sense, I use "world-view" to indicate a system for understand one's relation to a community larger than one's immediate social group. As suggested by developmental psychologists such as Erikson (1968), adolescents are forming identities and figuring out their role in relation to the world. Perhaps civic engagement meets a need of some adolescents to act in accordance to developing beliefs about their role in society. This is an importance contribution for future research to explore. It is

well established that civic involvement can lead to youth developing beliefs about society. However, perhaps this is more than an outcome of civic action. Perhaps one important motivation for youth civic involvement is the need to take action toward or to develop a worldview to understand one's relation to society. This differs dramatically from the most common motivations for other extracurriculars such as sports, arts, and many school clubs or hobbies (Fredricks et al., 2002; Pearce & Larson, 2006) and might help explain why some youth are civically involved while others are not.

For some, such as the youth who become civically involved to address specific issues of interest, motivations for civic involvement might fit with proposed motivations such as making a difference, feeling empowered, or helping contribute to social norms and values (e.g., Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002). These youth might also be motivated by needs that have been suggested for other types of extracurricular activities, for example, having fun, fitting in, and gaining or showing competence (e.g., Fredericks et al., 2002). All of these motivations are worth further exploration along with the potentially unique civic motivation of enacting or forming a worldview.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. There are inevitable problems of self report and limits to how much information is obtainable though one time interviews. This was an exploratory study meant to examine what motivates civic involvements and to offer hypotheses to be tested with additional research. The sample is not representative of youth in America and the findings, though potentially generalizeable, are meant to generate ideas rather than to test a model.

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Directions for future research

Future research can address which of these motivation categories will lead to sustained civic involvement over time. Most likely, this will depend heavily on subsequent experiences in civic involvements. However, one could hypothesize that generalized beliefs might lead to greater sustained civic interest through affective commitments to civic involvement in general. Or conversely, those with generalized beliefs but not specific issues of passion might lose interest as they fulfill goals (e.g. the goal to be prepared for future citizenship) without deep passion connected to a specific issue to sustain involvement.

More research is needed to explore the variety of both beliefs and issues that lead to civic involvement. In this sample such beliefs were sometimes rooted in the importance of helping others, the importance of the public good, or the importance of positioning oneself to make an impact as a citizen in the future. Similarly, youth who were motivated by civic issues differed in the object of their interest. Usually issues were local rather than national and were personally meaningful rather than abstract. Future research should examine which issues evoke passion in what contexts and the variety of belief systems relating to civic involvement.

Future research is also needed to understand whether motivations for explicitly political versus community service oriented civic involvements differ. There is much reason to believe that these two types of civic involvement differ but it is also plausible, and indeed this study suggests that, civic involvements during youth should be defined broadly and that motivations for both types might stem from similar needs to contribute to society, to address important issues, and to enact and refine a worldview.

Finally, future research should explore relations between motivations and de-motivators. What barriers are strong enough to prevent otherwise motivated youth from civic involvement? What motivators are strong enough to lead to sustained involvement in the face of barriers?

Conclusion

These data suggest an important set of dimensions that help explain youth civic motivation. Some youth have generalized beliefs that lead them to civic involvement while others are motivated by specific issues of personal relevance. Some youth respond to pressure or invitations while others are driven by a general desire to have an impact on their social world. These dimensions of motivation explain some of the variation within groups who have similar civic opportunities. Although civic involvement was lower among the group with few opportunities, there were some who were highly involved and they tended to be motivated by specific issues. This contrasts with the youth from higher resourced groups; these youth were more highly involved in general but the most highly involved tended to be motivated by generalized systems of belief. Across both levels of opportunity, the most highly involved youth had both beliefs and issues of interest and the uninvolved expressed neither belief about civic involvement nor connection to issues of concern.

This study provides indicators of what some motivating youth beliefs look like and where they come from. Though beliefs are considered as motivators for initial civic involvement in this study, beliefs no doubt develop as a result of earlier experiences in various contexts. These motivations for civic involvement don't appear out of thin air; they develop from early experiences and contexts. They then play an important mediating role between such contexts and experiences and subsequent civic involvement.

Knowing what motivates youth, and especially youth with varying levels of opportunity,

adds to existing knowledge about processes of youth civic development as well as offers

practical implications for facilitating civic involvement among youth. Youth have various

beliefs, concerns, desires, and interests leading them toward or away from civic involvement; it

is necessary to consider this as research on civic development moves forward. Adult educators

and mentors who are knowledgeable about recognizing youth beliefs and interests might be more

successful in structuring opportunities for youth that provide a way to engage with and develop

those beliefs.

However, what happens after initial civic involvement is also of crucial importance.

Motivation is a process and motivations for youth civic involvement are varied and can be more

internal (e.g., beliefs and passions) more external (e.g., response to opportunities and

requirements) and most likely, a combination of both. Civic development, as with all

development, is a complex process. In fact, many of the youth in this study discussed how their

motivations and goals changed as a result of their involvements. This supports the well

established literature that motivations change over time as a result of participation in civic

activities (e.g., Yates & Youniss, 1999) and that experiences shape civic attitudes and

commitments (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995) through various processes such as

transformation of goals (Colby & Damon, 1992), acquisition of skills, and exposure to influential

mentors and new ideas (Flanagan, 2008; Hess, 2009). That internal motivations matter in civic

involvement aligns with past research, such as that of public administration scholars (e.g.,

Penner, 2003). This study provides new insights about the nature of motivations for youth civic

involvement. Motivation for youth civic involvement is only one piece in understanding the

process of civic development however, it is an important piece that I believe bridges social

context with internal psychological understanding. If we understand why some youth are

initially attracted to civic involvement, we can better capitalize on such motivations to facilitate

broader and deeper involvement among diverse youth.

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[INSERT Table 1. Sample Youth Demographics and Civic Involvement Information]

Table 2. School Profiles

	School A	School B	School C	School D
# of Students	1,949	1,197	332	1,943
Demographic statistics	76% Asian 18% White 6% Other	45% White 27% Hispanic 16% Asian 4% Filipino 5% Other	58% Black 37% Hispanic 6% Other	29% Hispanic 29% Black 15% Asian 27% White
% Eligible for free or reduced lunch (2009-2010)	5%	20%	74%	47%
Drop-out rate over 4 years (2007-2008)	6 students (1.2%)	13 students (4.2%)	24 students (24.4%)	48 students (9.7%)
% graduated (2008)	99%	97%	67.9%	87.6%

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Table 3. *Emergent Categories of Civic Motivation*

Type of motivation	Example Quotes
Issue-driven	(116) I wanted to change the community, and wanted to teach all youth the history that is not being taught at schools like ethnic [history]…
Self-goals	(103) It started off as more personal, like being able to develop as a leader, being able to be exposed to different types of knowledge, different types of people …There's a lot of interaction with business professionals, so it's a really professional experience in that sense.
Response to pressure/invitation	(119) Yeah, at our school there's an organization and it's for – I guess for higher education of third-world countries. They often do fundraising, I think. I don't know – I'll just help them out. My friend started it, so I'll often help him out because it's for a good cause.
Beliefs/values	(100) Well, the entire idea of community service, like giving back to your community, not just taking. And sharing information and knowledge with other people.
Positive contribution/make an impact	(110) Well, it goes into water polo because that's my passion. I love doing that. That's why I like doing all the sponsorship board, and I want to make cubbies and I want to make bleachers. Because it's my passion, so I wanna better that environment. I wanna do everything I can for that. That's the most important to me.