Civic Participation as Means of Empowerment. Preventing Social Exclusion of Youth in Precarious Life Conditions in Spain*

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Abstract

This article explores the possible effects of empowerment as a result of being involved in civic associations in people living in conditions of precariousness, focusing specifically on Spanish youth at risk of social exclusion. The article shows that, in the absence of individual economic and educational resources, the environmental stimuli provided by particular associations may prove highly relevant in order to improve the situation of this group of young people. These associations teach youth civic practices and values that help them manage precariousness and provide them with new resources to seek new life opportunities. To a certain degree, these associations manage to compensate for the lack of personal resources. We present the results of a qualitative study for which data were collected from 122 young individuals. The study identifies specific factors of vulnerability and explains how they can be dealt with. It also demonstrates that, thanks to civic engagement, the young people involved were able to develop capabilities that reduced their risk of falling into marginality and enhanced their chances of finding new life opportunities.

Keywords: civic practices; risk of exclusion; contextual opportunities; empowerment

Resumen. *Participación cívica como fuente de empoderamiento. Prevenir la exclusión social de los jóvenes en condiciones precarias en España*

Este artículo estudia posibles efectos de empoderamiento, como consecuencia de participar en asociaciones cívicas, en personas que viven en condiciones de precariedad; nos centramos en jóvenes en riesgo de exclusión social en España. Encontramos que en ausencia de recursos económicos y educativos individuales, estímulos contextuales procedentes de específicas asociaciones permiten mejorar su situación. Estas asociaciones enseñan prácticas cívicas y valores que les ayudan a manejar su precariedad y les dotan de recursos para encontrar nuevas oportunidades. En alguna medida, estas asociaciones compensan la carencia de recursos individuales. Presentamos resultados de una investigación cualitativa en la que trabajamos con una muestra de 122 jóvenes. Identificamos factores de vulnerabilidad y cómo manejarlos y comprobamos que a través de la participación aprendieron a reducir el riesgo de caer en la marginación y encontraron nuevas oportunidades.

Palabras clave: prácticas cívicas; riesgo de exclusión; oportunidades contextuales; empoderamiento

Summary

1. Participation, resources and opportunities: the debate

The aim of this article is to explore the chances of constructing active citizens by means of participative practices in populations with scarce resources and limited opportunities and, if such chances exist, to explore their actual effects. People's civic engagement and their ability to act as citizens are usually related to both their socioeconomic and educational opportunities and resources. Nevertheless, we wanted to determine whether people lacking the optimal socioeconomic and/or cultural resources do indeed engage in the public sphere and, if they do so, to explore the causes and the processes of their participation. We also wanted to enquire whether, through such engagement, the participants developed capacities that allowed them to improve their living conditions. From an analytical perspective, we were particularly interested in the relationships between resources, opportunities and civic participation in two different directions. We first examine the path leading *from people's resources to their civic engagement:* people who engage in civic practices usually have the necessary personal resources and opportunities at their disposal to do so; however, we wonder if there are other resources and opportunities still capable of inducing

civic participation in circumstances where people are presumed to lack the necessary means and opportunities for engagement—and, if so, what are they? Secondly (and conversely), we explore the path *from people's civic participation to resources*. Specifically, is it possible that people, thanks to their engagement in participative practices, obtain resources and opportunities that help them manage the factors of vulnerability affecting their lives. Why and how is this so? Our initial hypothesis is that engagement in participative experiences in the context of particular associations can help those involved to enhance their citizen competence and may provide them with personal resources as well . This latter aspect might be especially relevant when participants live in conditions of socioeconomic or cultural difficulties.

Mainstream theories on civic participation link public engagement to an individual's availability of resources—mainly the educational and financial resources derived from a person's socio-structural position, which are normally understood as incentives and qualifiers/enablers for civic engagement (Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978). However, other theoretical approaches underline the importance of the existence of different venues for inducing public participation in circumstances where such resources are scarce (Baiocci, 2005; Baiocci and Kunrath Silva, 2008; Poletta, 2002, 2006). Moreover, some of the authors responsible for these approaches also emphasize the consequences that the civic engagement of people with poor resources has for both the broader socio-political sphere and the individuals involved (Mansbridge and Morris, 2001; Baiocci, 2005; Baiocci and Kunrath Silva, 2008; Poletta, 2002, 2006; among others). These studies focus on the resources and opportunities offered by specific contexts, and show that, in such cases, the opportunities present in the environment where people live may compensate for their lack of individual chances. Therefore, these authors stress the fact that the resources required by civic participation are not only of an individual type, but can also be communitarian resources coming from existing groups, networks or associations. Following these contributions, our study focuses its attention beyond individual positions and concentrates on people's surroundings as settings of everyday life, where community resources have the potential to make up for the lack of personal opportunities (see Theron et al., 2011). In any particular community, this potentiality can be the result of the presence of mobilized actors, associative practices or particular types of events which, owing to their formative capacity, act as conditions or sites for political learning (Sigel, 1995; Funes, 1995a, 1995b).

2. Our unit of analysis

To accomplish the goals of our study, it was important to accurately choose the population group that would provide the basis for our empirical study. Thus, to select our sample, we took into account two kinds of factors. The first was the absence of resources, which involved the selection of a social segment objectively occupying a dire socioeconomic position—as far as income and

education are concerned—and displaying problems of integration and other types of difficulties, as we shall see later in more detail. Secondly, we decided to select a period of life which is especially critical for the construction of an individual's character as a citizen, as a person and as an autonomous being, namely the transition from adolescence to adulthood. We consider this period to be a particularly revealing time in a person's life cycle due to both its fruitfulness and complexity. It is the time when an individual's personal identity is developed; and studies on citizenship and political socialization stress its relevance for the development of the person's civic and political personality[1], which implies becoming not only an adult but also a full citizen. Subsequently, our target population comprised young people experiencing serious disadvantages that might well lead them into social exclusion.

We called our chosen social segment *'youths at risk of social exclusion'.* Thus*, risk* and *disadvantage* (as a potential cause of exclusion) were concepts that played a central role in our research. As far as risk is concerned, we were confronted with two different types of 'risks': in the first place, the risk of social exclusion/marginalization faced by young people themselves because of the precarious conditions they lived in. Secondly, the potential risk that this implies for society, that is, the probable conflicts deriving from the presence of growing numbers of young people in increasing conditions of deprivation. These youth are referred to as being 'at risk of exclusion' because our research focused on people living in extreme conditions on the brink of social exclusion and/or marginalization. As for the notion of *disadvantage*, our study concentrated on economic, social, family or cultural factors leading to vulnerability. Therefore, besides our initial theoretical objective concerning the effects of civic participation on citizenship construction and empowerment in situations of scarcity, we presumed that our research could also contribute to the debate about ways to achieve social integration and avoid conflict in areas close to marginalization.

In order to frame our empirical study, we shall begin by presenting some data regarding our unit of analysis when we developed our study. Young people are a social group subject to a heterogeneous set of factors of inequality. In this sense, some general data inform us about the situation of the factual or potential inequality of young Spaniards. Since 2011, Spain has been the EU country with the highest rate of youth unemployment, which is around 50% for people under 25. Meanwhile, in Europe, youth unemployment reached 20% in 2011. Similarly, more than 6% of young Spaniards aged 18 to 24 years old have no basic vocational education and training. This implies that their risk of social exclusion is considerably higher than the European average

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1. In studies on political socialization there is a consolidated tradition of considering this period of life to be the most relevant one for the construction of the political subject (in classical theories like those of Easton and Dennis (1969) or Almond and Verba (1963), and in more critical ones such as those of Merelman (1986) or Sigel (1995); see also Funes (1995a, 1995b, 1998).

(2.8%) and is on a par with countries like Greece (8.5%), Romania (7.5%), Ireland (6.5%) and Bulgaria (6.3%). The risk of falling into poverty in Spain is also among the highest rates in the European Union. According to EURO-STAT, 20% of Spaniards between 16 and 24 were in this situation in 2010. The school dropout rate is usually a good indicator to analyze young people's social and economic opportunities. In Europe, only Malta and Portugal exceed Spain's dropout rate, which was around 30% at the end of the last decade.

In view of the current state of affairs, four key variables affect young people's risk of social exclusion. The first is 'school failure'. Several studies have shown that academic failure increases the probability of being unemployed, earning lower wages, experiencing health problems and showing reduced risk-aversion (Psacharopoulos, 2007). It has been estimated that each year of schooling has a significant effect on reducing people's dependency on social assistance provided by the state or other institutions (Oreopoulos, 2003). A second key variable is discrimination. Discrimination based on ethnicity or other cultural conditions increases the likelihood of young people being affected by situations of social exclusion. However, it is equally important to take into account the effects of subjective discrimination on the beliefs and attitudes of young people towards their own lives. In other words, the subjective feeling of being discriminated reinforces the risk of social exclusion (Gee and Walsemann, 2009). Unemployment or poor working conditions are also one of the elements noted in the literature on youth and social exclusion. As we already pointed out above, the youth unemployment rate in Spain is one of the highest in Europe. In addition, some studies have shown that young people most often find jobs with precarious working conditions. Thus, both unemployment and job insecurity become a gateway into processes of social exclusion. A fourth factor of social exclusion has to do with the legal status of certain young people. Youth and immigration have been identified in the literature as closely interrelated factors. Although the lack of legal residency rights is not seen in the literature as a direct factor of exclusion, it is considered as an enhancer of other conditions favoring exclusion, such as precariousness or participation in the underground economy, school failure, discrimination, crime, etc. (Carlson et al., 2006).

This brief description shows the extent to which young Spaniards were being specially affected by factors of inequality at the time we carried out our research, and things were only getting worse back then. Several studies have found patterns of inequality which are consistent with all the information we have just provided (Tezanos, 2013; Tezanos, 2007). In addition, we must take into account that all these factors of vulnerability affecting young people may have strong effects on their maturing processes, both at the personal and the social level. López Blasco (2006) coined the term *'constellations of disadvantages'* to refer to the way in which these traits of disadvantage often occur in real life. This means that factors of disadvantage do not commonly come in isolation but occur together (when young people are simultaneously affected by low or no income, lack of formal education, problems of integration, and so on,

their life conditions are harder). This accumulation of difficulties affects the process of transition to adulthood and influences young people's opportunities to manage their personal and social development and integration. Thus, they probably hamper their access to the political world and to community management. However, that having been said, we should like to stress that our central topic in this paper is neither youth nor exclusion; rather it is the possibility that—under these circumstances—young people take part in civic practices, as well as the effects of such participation.

3. Substantive citizenship: civic practices, capacities for managing difficulties

As the possibilities of developing participative practices and the effects of these practices on the people involved are the central point of our study, we shall now focus our attention on participation and citizenship studies; particularly those approaches which understand participation as a way of achieving substantive citizenship.[2] Following the work of Leca (1991), we distinguish between citizenship by membership (*de jure* citizenship) and citizenship by involvement (*de facto)*. The latter is well suited to our analysis, which focuses on the subjects' experiences in public life (substantive citizenship). Similarly, the notion of Somers (1999) pointing to "citizenship practices" as forms of political identity and social integration and stressing that citizenship is learned by engaging in public activities is also highly relevant for our present study. An individual's political socialization derives from the exercise of this kind of activities and involves a kind of political learning (Merelman 1986; Sigel, 1995; Funes 2003, 2006). This allows us to analyze the youth/citizenship relationship by considering young people as "citizens under construction" (Benedicto and Morán, 2007) and taking into account the statements by Lister et al. (2005) regarding the proactive attitude of sectors of youth, their involvement in society and their building of an identity through active participation and social commitment. These citizenship practices may take different forms, as they can be implemented through civic commitment, collective action or political participation.

Nevertheless, to better understand these practices and their effects, the citizenship approach must be accompanied by Sen's (2009) theory of capabilities. Therefore, we must also pay attention to the way that people who live under specific circumstances handle their disadvantaged condition. Sen distinguishes between the material situation of citizens and "the life they are able to live." This means that people's disadvantages are not exclusively due to material inequality, but also depend on their desires and their ability to transform their available resources into opportunities for life, what Sen calls a "conversion handicap". Following Sen's approach, we can interpret constellations of dis-

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2.   Studies on transitions offer us another possible way of analyzing this target (see, among others, EGRIS, 2001). However, we use the age factor in this case only as one more factor of vulnerability, because our study is about civic participation, its possibilities and its effects.

advantages, not only as irreversible barriers, but also as opportunities; they can convert available resources into capacities for managing difficulties. From the data collected, we shall see whether participation allows the youths we studied to manage their *constellations of disadvantage,* reverse the terms and overcome what Sen (2009) called their "conversion handicap"*;* in other words, whether they manage to transform their difficulties into life opportunities.

4. Research sequence and description of the fieldwork

Our research was carried out from September 2009 to June 2010 in two geographical areas of Spain: the Community of Madrid and the Community of Andalusia. We conducted qualitative research using two techniques: (1) biographical interviews to analyze how each individual constructs his/her socio-cognitive processes concerning both civic participation and how they manage their precarious living conditions; and (2) discussion groups in order to determine the interactive dynamics of these socio-cognitive processes and the social meanings constructed in their environments, which will become mobilizing cognitive frameworks. We propose a constructivist approach based on symbolic interactionism, on the dramaturgical perspective, and on situational and conversational analysis. These perspectives allow us to understand the social construction of processes of engagement by integrating the different stimuli coming from the environments and by evaluating how each of them affects individuals in their own decisions.

Sixteen biographical interviews were conducted: 8 in Andalusia and 8 in Madrid, as well as 16 discussion groups: 10 in Madrid and 6 in Andalusia. Between 6 and 8 people took part in each of the discussion groups. In total, we collected information from 122 young people. Several variables were considered for the selection of the respondent's profiles (for both the interviews and discussion groups). These included stratification markers of (1) age, comprising three intervals: 18-21; 22-25; 26-29; (2) sex: 50% women and 50% men; (3) place of residence: urban (several characteristics of neighborhoods) and rural (industrial, agricultural or services as dominant sectors in the areas), as well as deprivation markers, including (1) educational markers: school dropout or low grades; (2) occupation markers: unemployment, or precarious and discontinuous jobs; (3) dependency/autonomy markers: economic dependence on family with few resources, living on their own with few resources or with strong family responsibilities; and finally (and in addition to the previous markers), 25 percent of them were of immigrant origin. As for the public participation variable, we used a wide range of criteria for the selection of our sample from community to political engagement, including both conventional and non-conventional forms of participation with any kind of involvement in public venues.

Taking into account that civic participation was also one of our dependent variables, we considered it in a different manner from the other ones in terms of our selection criteria. In this respect, we made a distinction between biographical interviews and discussion groups. For the first, we only selected people with

experience in any kind of civic engagement, while for the discussion groups, we included participants and non-participants in order to confront the discourse of disaffection with the discourse of commitment. For the in-depth interviews, we only selected people with participative experience, because the intensive data provided by this technique facilitate the achievement of a global and framed (situated) explanation of their social process of construction of experiences. On the other hand, we wanted to confront their opinions with the opinions of people with no participative experience at all, and we did so in the discussion groups. We thought that contrasting the discourse of commitment and the discourse of disaffection would provide us additional information, as each person defends his or her own visions—perceptions of politics and opportunities and so on—in a more intensive way when they are in front of others with different views. We recorded and transcribed the results from the interviews and groups and analyzed the material according to the protocols of semiotic analysis, the situational logic approach and the dialogical construction of events methods (see Ricoeur, 1981; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974; Goffman, 1974).

5. Vulnerability factors and environmental resources

5.1. Risky environments: when the social setting is the first problem

For some of these young people, overcoming the difficulties that mark their lives requires moving away from their original surroundings—or at least from a significant part of their environment—if they want to avoid social exclusion and marginalization. We call living environments where difficulties take hold and accumulate "risky environments". Since such environments coincide in space and time, they reproduce and feed back on themselves. The expression "constellations of disadvantage" (López Blasco, 2006) graphically describe this idea of accumulation and reproduction of negative conditions, such as an impoverished economic situation, school failure, early school dropout, increased levels of unemployment and sometimes pre-delinquency practices, among others, which lead to growing situations of vulnerability. Here we include examples of how other kinds of resources (coming from the context as well) may be activated in these circumstances. We explain how the fact of engaging in an association helps these youth to stay away from these risky environments, that is, how they avoid the danger of marginalization by developing their own capacities to build a new identity and not engage in jeopardizing practices. These are practical examples of what Sen (2009) calls "conversion handicap," Baiocci (2005) and Poletta (2002) term "appropriation and improvement of the situation" or McAdam's refers to as a "process of cognitive liberation" (1982).[3]

3. McAdam (1982) explains the *process of cognitive liberation* as taking place in three steps: (1) the system loses legitimacy; (2) the end of the attitude of fatalism; and (3) a new sense of efficacy. These three steps can be applied to the process of change we are seeing here and explain the transformation of how youth evaluate their previous lives and the consequences of the decisions they have made.

5.1.1. Avoiding the peer-group effect

Negative forces in the environment affect young people in a particular way due to the specific vulnerability of the life stage they are going through (Funes, 1995a, 1995b, 1999). This vulnerability is due to the fact that they are more sensitive to all sorts of stimuli, as well as the relevance of peer groups at this age. In the process of construction of a person's individual identity during adolescence, peer groups act as the central reference point, as their main circle of recognition (Pizzorno, 1989). Given that during the process to achieve personal autonomy young people must distance themselves from the reference of their families, which just links them to their previous identity, the peer group becomes the central emotional bond for creating a new way of seeing themselves and being seen by others. When the peer group offers harmful models, their influence seriously affects the process of formation of the individuals and their integration into adult life (see Funes, 1998; Feixa, 1998; Sletten, 2011, among others). The negative power that they get from their contexts is clearly demonstrated by the pressure they receive from peer groups.

Our analysis shows that the young people we studied had trouble in distancing themselves from their peer groups, despite acknowledging that their proximity to such groups made it more difficult for them to improve or to progress. Rejecting certain practices that their peer groups engaged in meant losing their recognition, which involved high emotional costs. The following statement illustrates this internal conflict:

> Question: What do you think are the most important problems of today's youth?
> Response: Dropping out […] young people dropping out of school, that is, when people say I'm going to live life, play the fool […] Going astray… Going astray […] They always get involved in the issue of drugs, the issue of gangs, the issue of being somebody, wanting to be someone in a group […] For example, it happened to me—didn't it?— that to be in a group of people, part of that group of people in the class or at school, you have to be like them, and to do the things they do, maybe bad things, you know? That's what I did, no? Do things to be one of them, right? [...] Sometimes, you have to drop out to feel accepted [...] get into drugs, smoke what you shouldn't smoke, drugs, join a gang. (Interview No. 1, Andalusia: 21-year-old Moroccan male, school dropout, unemployed, member of the Red Cross)

When we analyze this paragraph, we can see the need for recognition by the group even when it is clearly dangerous. As the respondent says, it is "the issue of being somebody" where "being somebody" means being recognized by those to whom you give credit or legitimacy. Following the approach of Pizzorno (1989) regarding the construction of identity or Mead's approach (1934) of personal development from the image of the other, we understand that personal identity is constructed by integrating into one's own image the image that the group of reference (or the recognition circle in Pizzorno's

words) provides you (Pizzorno, 1989; Mead, 1934). What the group suggests here is "going astray", that is, leaving school and engaging in socially disapproved behaviors.

In such situations, one solution can be to replace one reference group for another. In doing so, the benefits that the person loses when he or she leaves the first group can be gained back if another proper group is found. While the process is difficult at all ages, it is much more difficult at younger ages due to the high emotional cost it involves, as can be observed in the process through which this young man substituted one reference group (his dangerous peer group) for another (the association in which he began to participate):

> Question: How can young people avoid these negative situations?
> Response: By acquiring training and living a life as far as possible from the problems that drag you down, which I consider are drugs, the thing of trying to join a group, the cool guys, which is to be someone cool as they say […] For example, what I did was become a volunteer here at the Red Cross. And yes, it works […] Yes, becoming a volunteer and giving advice […] I can't give much advice, but the little experience I've had in such cases, well, you can do it […] It's that I suffered it in the past, I did. I was one of those young people; I was, of course, and I admit it, and I regret it. (Interview No. 1, Andalusia)

In analytical terms, it is important to distinguish between two discursive nuclei in this paragraph that technically describe two movements in the evolution of the youth's behavior. First: "letting yourself be led" by what "draws you to be cool, to be in a cool gang;" "being cool" means "being somebody", being valued by one's group of friends, assuming the costs of marginality. His second movement goes in the opposite direction and it represents the change of reference group. In what follows we can observe how the respondent values this new group:

> It works, you only have to […] spread the word, say: "Look, you can lean on this;" you only have to tell them, say: "Look, you can support yourself with this. This will be good for you." And yes. Many friends [...] And they follow you. Today, a friend came to volunteer and loved the idea, the project, how things work. Yes, you just have to reach out […] to young people and say, "Hey, I'm here to help you and for whatever you need' […] The Red Cross. That has contributed a lot, because here the only […] the only vision is to go ahead, to move forward and improve, and it's […] it's pretty positive.

The respondent distanced himself from his peer group to seek a different framework of values (i.e., the association) as a new circle of recognition to facilitate his process of personal transformation. In McAdam's words, what happened in this case was a process of cognitive liberation (1988:134-139).

Now, let us examine the case of a young man from another poor neighborhood:

> I've had loads of problems because of the neighborhood I've been in, you know, Orcasitas is a difficult neighborhood, then when I was little […] Really, It was especially conflictive, when you're young rather than when you're little. Yes, I've felt marginalized, I've felt harassed […] Yes, these are things you feel. (Interview No. 3, Madrid: 20-year-old Spanish male, school dropout, unemployed, member of the Tiempo Joven leisure time association)

This respondent began to participate in *Tiempo Joven,* an association dedicated to training young people with problems by helping them to develop their own resources of their own. Here he explains his version about youth and the possibilities for solving the problems they have, and the opportunities he sees now after his experience in the association:

> Because young people often do what they do because they have no other options, don't they? So to speak. Come on, it's not an excuse, either, is it? But if they have more options to choose from and maybe these places, like I say, Tiempo Joven, which has workshops for learning, a place to meet more people [...] I think it is, they are, one of the solutions for a better world, yes, because they have such close contact with young people that they leave a deep impression on them, you know? (Interview No. 3, Madrid)

We have just seen two individuals in problematic situations who, in both cases, valued the role that the associations played in their processes of change from a situation of vulnerability (environment of drugs, firearms, etc.) to one which provided them the opportunity to acquire job skills that would afford them a life outside of these risky groups, as we will also see below. This is possible, on the one hand, because they learned several life skills and, on the other, because they were able to develop a new discourse; one which was more critical with their previous surroundings and which built on what they observed in their new life. In line with other studies such as Logan-Greene et al. (2011) and Funes (1998), these associations can be understood as *protective factors* for at-risk youth, as the following words show:

> A young person is a sponge and they soak in positive things, as long as it's done right, right? […] I'm telling you, I started […] I was quite reluctant with people I didn't know, or shy, to put it one way […] I found it hard, didn't I?, to get confidence and through this I gained a lot of confidence in myself, and you know, I could […] I had […] well, that, more […] I was more open to others […] I don't know, you grow as […] you grow as a person, to put it one way, you become more participatory, more friendly, you like being with all sorts of people. Maybe I was more close to people I'd never had anything to do with before, you know, and so any […] I don't know, you learn not to label people so much at first, right? Maybe […] or from their appearance or from what they tell you, you give everyone a chance. It's really good. (Interview No. 3, Madrid)

5.2. Immigration as an additional risk factor: focusing on the problem of integration

As we explained above, one of the factors of vulnerability in the social sector we studied was immigration, understood always as no more than an additional risk factor. If economic difficulties, low (or no) qualifications, family problems and so on are experienced by someone from a foreign country, these add more social and cultural difficulties to the person's experiences. For this reason, in our study, we looked for foreign youth who were trying to understand the processes they were going through, as well as their possibilities of acting on and solving situations. The data analysis enabled us to distinguish two different routes—which we propose as models—towards integration and transition to adulthood. Here too we highlight the role of associations in these processes.

5.2.1. Being "one of the crowd": making differences invisible

In this first model, the strategy chosen to overcome the difficulties involved in being an immigrant consists of trying to achieve the maximum level of integration in an attempt to become "one of the crowd" or, at least to the extent that this is possible, not to stand out as an immigrant. This is a strictly utilitarian option that seeks to maximize the benefits of the (difficult) wager of immigration and considers the minimization of cultural differences as the best option. Consistently with this option, the respondents choose to participate in groups from the host country and not associations of or for foreigners, as in the cases belonging to our second model. This option involves considering the culture of the host society preferable to that of the country of origin. This is highly relevant, because the desire to regain or maintain one's own culture is absent. The dimension of an identity of resistance is deactivated; it disappears as a reference for emulation or as an object of desire. The reason for this is that the culture of origin becomes "non-functional" in so far as it does not provide the same advantages as those that may be gained from immigration. As a consequence, the importance of the culture of origin is minimized while the 'culture of adoption' is overvalued. In this model, learning the language of the host society is a priority and relationships with fellow citizens and even with other foreigners are avoided because they do not facilitate integration, as the case of a young man from Morocco shows:

> My father didn't speak to us in anything but Spanish, and he told me not to mix with Moroccans. Yes. Yes, very clever! That's the reason, because he'd foreseen everything, and I understand and appreciate it, because the truth is he was [...] He's right. I was pretty silly then, really. If you live here and think you have a future here, then you must integrate. I think rather that [...] some, many, exclude themselves from society, they don't want to integrate [...] People who don't want to learn the language, who don't want to learn anything, only work, only make money [...] that's a mistake, I think. (Interview No. 1, Andalusia)

In accordance with this respondent's view or plans for his immigration experience (really a family strategy), this young man volunteered in a national association (the Red Cross) where he collaborated with other Spaniards: "My sister chose the Red Cross for me, she was worried about me […] and she was right." This respondent explained his decision while he was speaking about the dangerous group of friends he had when he was younger. Apparently, he applied the same formula to every decision he took; a formula which his father devised for them: to make invisible whatever is thought or known to be a stigma. Their aim was to obtain the maximum profitability from the sacrifice of immigration, to take advantage of the opportunities that Europe afforded (promised) them. The decision to participate in a host country association helped him to overcome the most negative effects of the disadvantages in his environment and become integrated in the society, as we saw in the previous section. Indeed, active interaction with other Spaniards, as well as cooperating in solving Spanish problems instead of focusing on immigration problems, facilitated his integration. Situational logic analysis and dramaturgical analysis give us the whole picture and help us understand the role of each of the actors involved: his family—not only his father, as his sister found this association for him—led him towards specific groups to try to redirect his life. When we examine the process, we can understand the function played by the association, of course, inside the proper type of environment.

Let us now present the case of another immigrant. The problems of adjustment of this respondent were likely to be smaller since, due to his Latino origin, he did not experience a language barrier. Nevertheless, he also had to deal with a certain stigma, problems of rejection and even other more dangerous circumstances.

> When I arrived here, not so young, I realized that people, or the kids, already think that they [...] they've already got their friends, right? [...] Then, integrating [...] Yes [...] Instead of getting into a gang, I thought I'd go [...] and I went searching for a boys' association and from then on, to participate as a volunteer or whatever. (Discussion Group No. 1, Madrid: 20-year-old Colombian male, precarious and temporary jobs, member of several human rights associations)

From the point of view of semiotic analysis, it seems he chose between participating in a gang or joining an association. Semiotic analysis allows the study of signifier chains in the language and the distinction between syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations in discourse. We will not dwell on whether the young man was expressing a doubt, considering an option or merely putting his thoughts in linguistic terms when he said "Instead of getting into a gang, I thought, I'd go... and I went searching for a boys' association". But what we cannot ignore, because it is highly significant, is the proximity, on the paradigmatic level, of the two types of groups in the youth's symbolic system of reference. In his symbolic and imaginary universe, gangs or associations seem to be interchangeable options. What we can clearly see here is the 'risk'

involved in these precarious life conditions. In order to face the difficulties and
overcome problems of rejection, there are several attractive options in the short
term, but some of them (like gangs) may entail greater difficulties and serious
dangers, rather than diminish them.

Certainly, the cost of immigration is lower in immigrant gangs. Gangs solve
problems of integration, recognition, isolation, and personal and identity con-
struction as their members interact with people from their own country who
experience the same problems, but at the cost of adopting a strategy of conflict
with the host society.[4] This is a relevant issue, although it involves a departure
from what we are concerned with here. Thus, we will only mention it now
and leave the issue for another paper. What we would like to analyze here are
measures of cooperation and solidarity that may help prevent what could be
considered easy ways out but which fail due to their proximity to delinquency.
In this case, the young person decided to cooperate with a Spanish association
in helping to solve a variety of problems, but not necessarily problems related
to immigration. Again, he wanted to act and be like any other Spanish person:

> I am currently with Cantinella. It's an association of [...] there are also some
> young people who like doing things for society, to help people a little who
> are also a bit [...] with the problem of unemployment, so they give them
> some kind of direction, guidance, there are also workshops like computing,
> for example, for people who have no knowledge of computers [...]. (Discussion
> Group No. 1, Madrid)

Once again, this is the case of an individual who, due to his immigrant
origins, found it difficult to integrate into Spanish society. As his explanation
reveals, he took the decision to join an association at a significant moment in
his life, thus permitting us to see the whole scene. He realized the importance
of becoming integrated in society to live in better conditions and escape mar-
ginalization. Although he may have made many other decisions at that time,
it is important to highlight that he decided to join a local association in order
to overcome his problems of integration. In this case, the relevant aspect is
that, in his integration scheme, he considered joining a local association and
helping the people in it as he believed it would facilitate his social insertion.
He was able to use a local resource (an association) in which he could both
participate and develop his personal resources and skills. Besides being an
expression of solidarity, the fact of participating was of strategic importance
for him; a view which seems to be perfectly coherent in his discourse. How-
ever, we must be careful: speaking of 'participation' is not enough; he could
have participated in a gang or in an immigrant group as well. What we would
like to underline is the fact that participating in a local, altruistic association
had specific effects.

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4. In this sense, see the analysis of the effects of subcultural groups building new and own
    worlds, and the risks of doing so in Feixa (1998) or Funes (1998).

5.2.2. Confinement to 'mine/ours' for coping with being uprooted

In the following model, immigrants give priority to relationships with others from their own country of origin in order to alleviate situations of depression, isolation and sadness. They seek places where residents from their same country live, their lost environment is reproduced, their traditions are maintained, and where they can share their problems and help each other. In what follows, we show the case of a young Russian woman who described the hardships of her experience, her feelings, and how she alleviated them:

> It's very hard. Because I didn't even know how to speak, or express myself […] I didn't understand anything. I lived […] At that moment I lived in the village of Vicar, which is a very quiet village, very […] where everything closes at nine and there's nothing [...] Oh!, very difficult. Very difficult. Crying, crying and crying. Always crying. Because it's very difficult; when you don't know how to speak, it's very difficult for people to understand […] Oh, gosh […] and I was studying at secondary school, studying in the afternoon, learning Spanish at home […]. (Interview No. 3, Andalusia: 22-year-old Russian woman, school dropout, unemployed and member of a Russian association)

Despite this, she found a local group and, thanks to her participation in it, she was able to come to terms with her situation and recover. She joined the Pro-Ruski Association in Almeria, and she describes her objectives and experiences:

> I'm in the Russian Association Pro-Ruski, in Almeria. It's near my home in Roquetas. As […] I've already been there from the beginning, since I came to Spain… at least for six years; yes, about six years. I went there just for the sake of talking, because I didn't know anyone. It was near my house and I needed to communicate with people […] At least be, at least feel something from my country. And I met Russian people there, yes.
> **Ques**tion: Would you return to your country? Do you miss Russia?
> Response: Yes. Not right away, but when I finish my studies. Yes, I am (feel) very Russian! (Interview No. 3, Andalusia)

Specific nationality groups play an important instrumental role as well since they offer services such as solving administrative issues.

> It [the association] has helped me. Sure, yes, tremendously. I better understand the whole paperwork thing, how everything works […] I know Spanish laws, Russian laws. Before, for example, I didn't know anything and it didn't interest me and now I do [...] In the association, they help with paperwork, lawyers […] with work. (Interview No. 3, Andalusia)

Joining such associations helps to ease the difficulties of being an immigrant, although in this case the strategy was not to bridge the gap between immigrants and natives, but to maintain it. Both models aim to reduce the uncertainty and unease of a hostile environment. Reducing suffering and hav-

ing a stable life are everyone's goals and integration and associations are a way to achieve that. Our data and the cases we have just examined, would seem to indicate that being members of an association empowers these people with few resources and helps them to overcome their difficulties.

6. Translating environmental resources into individual opportunities

6.1. Acquiring competencies and values for private and public life

In addition to the integrating function of associations, as we have seen, being involved in groups can have other relevant effects. Through the activities of associations, members may be able to develop certain personal skills for their private life as well as their role as citizens. Let us go back now to the case of Interview No. 1, the young man from Morocco who was a Red Cross volunteer. This young man acquired the instrumental skills and knowledge needed to get a job:

> I started making photocopies for the technical coordinator, and she began to teach me how to do things on the computer, with Word files. She began to get me involved […] to teach me the intranet, databases, to do training courses, to get me into other areas such as First Aid and Emergency, to do courses on medical transport, first aid, lifeguarding […] it all began to get me hooked. And now I've been there for some time and I am stable on a project that needs […] that requires a lot of work. I'm doing well. (Interview No. 1, Andalusia.)

Something similar happened to the respondent who was a member in the Tiempo Joven leisure group. He was trained in breakdancing, which opened up new horizons for him:

> Thanks to the association, I went to a workshop […] that I tell you seemed like […] you know, it's in the neighborhood and you say, why?, you're not going to get anything out of it. Well, people have come out [of that place], I tell you, this friend of mine here just yesterday […] was in a theatre, was dancing and since then, no one has taught him anything else. He went to that workshop and he made money dancing in a theater. That's why I'm telling you I've been doing exhibitions myself after that, you know, I learned, I picked up the basics, and from there I've moved on, so, and I got better, more experience and thanks to that, well, that's something that's hooked me. […] Thanks to break, I've travelled; I found a job like this one […] Well, because I got the free-time monitor certificate through Tiempo Joven. (Interview No. 3, Madrid)

According to the literature on civic participation, working in associations may involve learning skills for behaving as a committed citizen in society (van Deth, 1997; Funes, 2006). The activities that people engage in in these associations empower them for acting in the public arena, as we saw in the case of the Red Cross volunteer who learned to assist people in trouble in several ways.

Another example is that of a young woman who was a member in the Poseidona cultural association where she had the opportunity to learn specific skills, develop relationships in new spheres and act in the public arena. Specifically, she had to interact with the municipal authorities and local firms in order to obtain financial support for the association's projects, which involved contacting several social and political stakeholders, all thanks to what she had learned in the cultural association:

> I had heard about the Poseidona cultural association. As the Poseidona Rock festival was being organized, they suggested giving it a different air and doing something for charity because it was […] what had happened in Haiti a little while ago […] I […], well, I hadn't organized the other festivals, but I got involved in it because I liked the idea, I thought it would also be very enriching for me to learn, and I did it. We began by asking the town council, we needed support for it […] We needed to make posters for the concert, if not, nobody was going to come, and we needed an average of €1,500, and asking door to door, well, in the end we succeeded, and we got the money and we got the posters. Well, before printing up the posters, you have to confirm the musical groups, you need to talk to the stand-up comedians […]. (Interview No. 7, Andalusia: 25-year-old Spanish female, primary studies, unemployed, member of the Poseidona environmental group)

Through these activities she acquired skills for public management, had the opportunity to met local political stakeholders and solved problems with the local administration and other members of the community. Her work entailed representation and mediation, as we see in her relationship with the town council and other associations while she was trying to obtain support for the festival.[5]

However, associations also act as schools of civic values, as we had the chance to observe in all the cases we studied, such as the young man who cooperated with the Red Cross:

> I've also participated by giving talks […] giving talks in schools to people of my age on the topic of dropping out of school, studying […] talking to people who were going through the same things I did. I spoke to them about, above all, above all the basic principles of the Red Cross, which are impartiality, neutrality, independence […] its voluntary nature, unity […] These are the principles, the seven basic principles of the Red Cross. (Interview No. 1, Andalusia)

This is also the case of the young Russian woman, who explains how she developed her own values and social skills, and her feeling of satisfaction in doing so:

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5. This statement confirms the idea that associations can be *schools of democracy* like some authors have stated (van Deth, 1997; Funes, 2006, among others).

> Yes, I help with the children. If help is needed, I help, in shows. If something has to be translated from Spanish to Russian for a child, for example, I try and do it. Helping more as an assistant. Me, for example, I used to be very selfish. And now, of course, because I see there are problems, that people are in another country for work, for studies. And I see the children more now with their problems [...] For instance, I like kids now more than before, much more. (Interview No. 3, Andalusia)

In addition, because they make these new values their own, they develop a new frame of reference by joining a symbolic universe that upholds new principles, as in this example:

> The association I tell you is a cultural one; it's a cultural association in Agua-dulce, about sports, and […] well, what they want is for people to enjoy nature, appreciate the good things we have, which often don't cost any money. They go hiking, they go […] The last activity was cleaning a seabed. Actually, with the help of a lot of people, you can clean up a truckload of garbage from a beach, just like they did. So those are things […] they're the activities I like because they're things that don't cost any money and you don't make any money out of them either. (Interview No. 7, Andalusia)

Through immersion in these new frames of references, the respondents found significant expressive benefits linked to several different aspects, such as the fact of being part of a particular way of life:[6] "Doing without being paid, expecting nothing in return […] enjoying things that don't cost any money." Nonetheless, all of these effects are only possible when the acquisition of skills and values is accompanied by other affective incentives like group recognition. Group approval is important. The association (as usually happens) begins to perform the role that group recognition plays in the lives' of the participants:

> I feel well, especially when we, the young people, got involved in the last project; when the older ones like recognized our good job […] The older ones!!! The Poseidonia Association acknowledged that we were doing it well, we were doing a good job […] And the truth is that, with this job, I think they've also recognized me, that I can give more, and I feel very […] very […] I feel good. I feel rewarded by the people […] So the truth is I also see it like a family, you know? (Interview No. 7, Andalusia)

Group recognition also helps in the construction of individual identity (Pizzorno, 1989), as we see in the following quote:

> It [getting involved in the association] has helped me gain more confidence in myself. For example, that's very important. Because, if you're not motivated, you don't love yourself. Then, it's been really useful for me […] being here and

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6. See McAdam (1982) and others such as Snow and Machalek (1983) for an explanation of the changes of involvement in a new universe of discourse.

feeling valued. And feeling valued has made me feel better. So whenever you get a pat on the back, it's good, you know? If you know you've done something good […] Yes, uh […] I think so. I don't think it's lucrative moneywise, but it's lucrative for me. I think helping makes me feel good (Interview No. 7, Andalusia)

The greatest value-expressive benefit is that which manifests itself as satisfaction or pleasure. It is the benefit that Hirschman (1986: 99) speaks of when he writes: "In full-time dedication to collective action, calculation operates the other way around: instead of deducting the cost of participation from the benefit of it, cost and benefit are added." The more involved you are, the more satisfied you feel, and the further away you are from apathy and pre-marginality.

In these five cases that we have presented as samples of many others, we can observe that the fact of getting engaged in an association can help people to develop personal autonomy (self-confidence, self-esteem). Through the activities in the association, these youth were able to improve their skills to manage and defend their own or other people's interests, both private and public. Moreover, depending on the association, their participation provided them the opportunity to learn values of solidarity and cooperation, while acquiring instrumental skills which improved their job qualifications. Finally, civic engagement introduced them into networks that could help them to gain access to the labor market and more profitable social environments. Certainly, during the period they were in the association, they were also subject to other influences that we do not know about and that might also account for these results. However, we have focused on their explanations and their own images and subjective definitions of the effects that these experiences had on their lives. Their risk of marginalization seemed to be reduced; they took advantage of the resources that the associations offered and they were encouraged by the new opportunities that opened up for them. Thus, these youths' *conversion handicap* was overcome (Sen, 2009), and the empowerment and improvement of their situation that Baiocci (2005) and Poletta (2002) describe took place in all these cases.

7. Conclusions

Now it is time to go back and review our research questions and the contribution of our work. We began this paper by framing our theoretical interest: the relationship between resources, opportunities and civic participation in the case of people living in precarious conditions. We wanted to explore, first, if there exist any resources and opportunities capable of inducing civic engagement in circumstances where we presume a lack of resources (and, if there are any, which ones); secondly (and conversely) we wanted to find out whether, thanks to their involvement, people were able to develop resources and opportunities for managing the vulnerability factors affecting their lives (and why and how this is so). As far as our first question is concerned, we

have found that yes, it is possible to participate and it is possible to develop citizen competences by means of civic engagement, even in the special conditions that our study has taken into consideration. The explanation for this lies in the fact that we explored contextual resources rather than only individual resources as is usually done in classical studies on civic participation. In this sense, our results are in line with other research (Baiocci, 2005, 2008; Poletta, 2002, 2006; Mansbridge and Morris, 2001) which shows that, in the absence of individual economic, cultural and educational resources, environmental stimuli become operational for both encouraging action and training people. Associations are local resources that stimulate participation and teach citizenship practices, attitudes and values, and they are especially important in populations that cannot attain such skills and values by any other means (through education, social networks, economic position, etc). Certainly, not all associations have the power to foster the values and attitudes of committed citizenship, solidarity and so on (only specific groups can do this) but almost all do provide certain skills and knowledge which surely help people to act as qualified citizens.

As for our second research question, we found that, at least in specific cases of collective action and in the case of young people, civic engagement can help manage situations of risk because it equips youth with the resources to enable them to make the most of new opportunities, both in personal and social or political terms. In this regard, some of the associations in our study enabled young people to overcome the lack of resources and opportunities commonly available to people who live in better conditions. These results confirm our initial hypothesis about the possibilities and probable effects of civic engagement as they indicate that associations can act as local resources for reducing both social and personal risks.

We began our paper by analyzing what we called "risky environments". Leaving such surroundings is the first step towards reducing deprivation and, as we have seen, some associations facilitate this exit. In the case of immigrant youth, the risk of marginalization is even more intense due to cultural factors, but associative practices also seem to be a useful strategy to minimize the risk. Engaging in an association gives young people a certain expertise in managing situations of deprivation, as well as skills and resources to improve their socially devalued position. In this sense, these youth become examples of what Sen (2009) refers to as the transformation of scarce resources into life chances. There is no doubt that other factors which have not been analyzed here, such as the youths' families, religious community or school, also had an influence on their strategies. Nonetheless, as there is usually a chain of effects in the same direction, we did find situations with a whole set of factors leading to the young person's participation in an association. Although we have examined these factors before (Funes, 2006), our goal here was to highlight the impact of the associations themselves. Indeed, the results of this study have not always been the same: not every person develops the same resources, not every association plays their role with success. An in-depth study of the

failed cases would be necessary to determine where the differences lie. Is it the youths' close environment? Is it their personal or psychological features? Could it be the associations' procedures? Clearly, further research is needed to answer these questions.

In conclusion, this research supports the theoretical and empirical approach which contends that social and political engagement is a potential way of reducing the effects of the absence of individual economic, educational and relational resources, as well as a feasible way for young people to become active citizens and more integrated individuals. If participative practices can help reduce the risk of young people falling into marginality—as it seems to do in the cases we have analyzed here—the resulting decrease in latent social conflict that this entails may benefit both the individuals involved and society at large.

Our contribution here is also part of a broader framework: that of theories of democracy and citizenship studies. In particular, it contributes to the ongoing debate about the relationship between deprivation and political/social action. The training and integration of disadvantaged individuals diminish the negative effects of inequality on political participation, because they empower people with few opportunities to play an active role in society. As a final point, when we take into account the conflicts arising from the growing numbers of young people in increasing conditions of deprivation, exploring feasible ways of integration that may prove able to reduce conflictual relationships within a society can be deemed as a fair enough topic for pursing this line of research further.

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