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The University of California, Davis

Youth Civic Engagement: Membership and Mattering in Local Communities

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Participation in community-based youth organizations and extracurricular activities appears to be a precursor to civic engagement in adulthood. Although this relationship has been documented in several studies (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997; Van Horn, 2001), less attention has been paid to explaining why participation during childhood leads to adult engagement. That is the focus of our paper. We discuss a set of hypotheses which may explain the association of youth involvement in community organizations with their civic engagement in adulthood, noting at the outset that these theses have not been tested.

The fact that involvement in nonformal youth groups is voluntary means of course that there is a selection bias inherent in the correlation noted above, that is, there may be something about young people who join community associations that makes them different from their peers who do not join. Selection bias aside, we believe that community associations provide a number of developmental opportunities that build civic identities and set youth on a path of lifelong commitment to their communities.

The least civic argument holds that involvement in youth groups is a basic form of informal social control. The after school hours from 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. are the times when most juvenile misdemeanors occur and thus a time of greatest need for community supervision. That niche is filled by many after school clubs and organizations (Carnegie, 1992). With the possible exception of athletics, youth who are involved in organized youth activities are less likely to be involved in antisocial acts or substance abuse (Allen, Philliber, Herrling, & Kuperminc, 1997; Eccles & Barber, 1999). Keeping youth connected to pro social reference groups and 'out of trouble' certainly sets them on a path which might lead to later civic engagement. However, in our view the civic function of community organizations runs much deeper. As a start, participation in such organizations provides a sense of purpose for the young people and an assets-based framing of youth for society. As Jane Addams noted early in the last century,

> "The sense of uselessness is the severest shock which the human system can sustain, and if persistently sustained, results in atrophy of function."

The activities of 4-H during the two world wars illustrates just how useful young people can be to the nation. During World War I, 4-H Club work was partially abandoned so that the energy of the members could be devoted to raising food as part of the war

effort. Many temporary county agents were hired resulting in a rapid increase in the number of 4-H Clubs and club members. At the end of the war, more than one million 4-H Club members were enrolled.

During War World II, the 4-H program focused on Victory Gardens. With the military and defense industries draining older youth from the farm, younger 4-H members took on added responsibilities. The 4-H war slogan was "Food for Freedom." In nearly every project category, 4-Hers recorded impressive increases in levels of agricultural production over the previous year. It was estimated that from 1943 until the end of the war, 4-H club members produced enough food to feed a million G.I.s serving in the American forces (Rasmussen, 1989). At the end of the war, 4-H enrollment once again saw a large increase, reaching a total of 1.5 million.

In response to both world wars, the 4-H organization was able to meet a national challenge. Their organizational response to the national challenge resulted in a focus on youth as national assets, in excellent public relations for the organization, and ultimately in an exponential increase in 4-H membership.

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Diffuse support for the polity: Experiences of membership and mattering

What civic roles do youth organizations play? The following definition of a citizen provides an answer and summarizes the three main themes which we develop in the remainder of this paper. The political theorist, Michael Walzer (1989, p. 211), defines a citizen as

> " a member of a political community, entitled to whatever prerogatives and encumbered with whatever responsibilities are attached to membership."

The appeal of this quote is its emphasis on the connection between membership, rights, and obligations in citizenship. The ties that bind younger generations to the broader community are reciprocal, that is, when young people feel that the community cares about them and that they have a say in community affairs, they are more likely to identify with the community's goals and to feel committed to its service. We begin by focusing on experiences of membership as the foundation for civic attachment and engagement or the development of social trust and group solidarity.

Social trust and group solidarity

The importance of social trust (defined as a standing decision to give 'others' the benefit of the doubt) is considered essential to a strong Civil Society. Among adults, higher levels of trust are related to civic engagement and the disposition to trust others is increased by such engagement (Putnam, 2000; Verba et al., 1995).

Nonformal youth organizations provide singular opportunities for developing social trust. Whereas acceptance and membership in families typically is assumed, membership and trust among one's peers is earned by working together towards goals defined in common—by working through differences that could otherwise divide the group. As a member of the group, an individual helps to shape its identity and has a say in defining its goals. When each member has a say, ownership of the project is enhanced.

By having a say, youth exercise the citizen's right to self-determination. But self-determination is not enough. In order to achieve group goals, individuals typically have to forego some personal preferences, that is, they need to be prepared to compromise, realizing that, in community affairs, we don't always get our way. In the give-and-take of peer group negotiations, young people learn that people (fellow citizens and members of the public) have different perspectives. They learn that (as in community affairs and in politics) resolving differences of opinion may require bargaining and compromise.

In group projects, members also hold one another accountable. Young people are often harder than adults on a group member who fails in his/her duty. To return to Walzer's quote, we would argue that the obligations a citizen owes by virtue of his/her membership

in the group is learned when members of the club or organization hold one another accountable for the project.

In sum, participation in nonformal organizations is an opportunity for young people to define what it means to be a member of the 'public'. By working together, they can see how their individual effort contributes to the group and how the collective efforts of several people can produce a better product (Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997). Political goals are rarely accomplished by the efforts of one individual. The group projects of community youth organizations are a means by which young people gain civic practice.

But there is a downside to group solidarity that warrants attention as well. Bonding strengthens the internal ties of group members and reinforces their identity. But if bonding precludes the abilities of members to bridge to other individuals or groups, then it can undermine democracy. As Erikson (1968) warned, social cliques pose dangers to democracy if youth have no opportunities to connect to others beyond their narrow borders.

We can turn to Dewey's (1916) thoughts on the aspects of groups that make them democratic. He noted first that to the extent that the interests of the members are numerous and varied, it should be more likely that everyone would play an integral role in the group and less likely that only a few people would 'take charge.' Second, to the extent that interactions with others outside the group were "full and free," the group should be less likely to be isolationist and exclusive. Isolationist groups, Dewey warned, were not only undemocratic but antisocial. Dewey's thesis as it applies to adults' civic engagement was supported in some of our recent work (Van Horn, 2001). One of the strongest predictors of the community and political involvement of adults in their thirties in this study was the number of *different* extracurricular clubs and activities in which individuals had participated in their high school years and the *different* civic skills (public speaking, fund-raising, organizing community events, etc.) they had practiced. If community youth development programs are going to fulfill their civic potential, Dewey's two conditions could provide a useful benchmark for program assessment.

In light of Dewey's principles, we should note that one problem that all voluntary youth organizations must face is that of self selection and the inevitable homogeneous nature of many of our youth groups. Club work has been the foundation of the 4-H program. This can be both good and bad. Although young people choose what most interests them (and thus might be more likely to stick with it), it is likely that the clubs are fairly homogeneous.

Indeed, the everyday contexts in which American teens spend their time are rather homogeneous settings and this fact can have consequences for democracy. As a result of decreasing family size, age grading practices, social homogenization of neighborhoods, and school tracking, adolescents have fewer opportunities to interact with people who are different from them on a wide range of dimensions. Thus, there may be few natural opportunities for young people to develop skills that are fundamental to the functioning of democratic societies, including perspective taking, negotiation, and compromise. If community youth organizations reach out to include youth from different backgrounds, encourage activities that would link across generations or otherwise motivate adolescents to engage with 'others' in their communities, they would not only enable youth to develop personal competencies but would strengthen democracy as well.

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Equality in peer relations and 'free spaces'

Political socialization has typically been conceived as a vertical process across generations but democracies imply an egalitarian quality in social interaction. Whereas vertical relationships between patrons and clients are the structure underlying an authoritarian social order, horizontal networks that build trust between equals are the basis for a democratic social order (Putnam, 2000). If voluntary youth organizations provide what Evans and Boyte (1992) have referred to as 'free spaces' then they may play a unique role in modern societies. Public or free spaces are sites where citizens can determine their own agendas. They are places of relatively free exchange of ideas, debate, and information.

The opportunity to practice the exchange and debate of ideas implies a large measure of autonomy and a particular role for adults. Rather than 'leading' youth groups or clubs, adults need to be in the background, monitoring, mentoring, facilitating, but not in charge. Because nonformal youth organizations allow young people to practice being in charge, leading, negotiating decisions, enjoying their successes and learning from mistakes, these organizations fulfill a special function in democracies.

By virtue of their non-hierarchical structure, community youth groups afford opportunities to practice democratic skills. In contrast to the other major institutions of socialization (families and schools) where relationships of power and authority are essentially asymmetrical, in youth groups the status of the members is the same. Such egalitarian relationships are a sine qua non for learning how to negotiate differences and reach a compromise — decision-making skills at the root of the democratic process. This even playing field means that members can gain experience in admitting and resolving differences of opinion in an atmosphere where the consequences of disagreeing are the same for everyone in the group. Exploring the meaning of equality is essential for the development of democratic dispositions. Negotiating peer relations in semi-structured groups like 4-H is ideal for this purpose.

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However, although an attainable ideal, equal status is not the norm in all peer groups and, as the research on intergroup relations has shown, status differences based on age, physical size, language, race and ethnicity, or sexual preference do not level themselves by default. A laissez-faire attitude can reinforce inequities of power within youth groups. To overcome those inequities active intervention by adults may be needed (Schofield, 1995). Tolerance is one of the fundamental principles on which the United States is based and if the dynamics of youth groups reinforce intolerant attitudes and behaviors, they are not building democracy. In this regard there is clearly a monitoring role for adults to insure a civil climate.

Free spaces also create environments for rendering otherwise invisible activity more apparent (Evans & Boyte, 1992). In this sense, the activities of young people would be seen as contributions, publicly acknowledged and valued.

Adults modeling the principles of Civil Society

Theorists in the political socialization tradition referred to the president and the police as the 'head and tail' symbols for children's image about the state and its authority (Easton & Dennis, 1969). But young people's beliefs in such symbols have eroded over the years, calling into question their viability as mechanisms whereby diffuse support for the polity develops. Instead, we have argued that it is in everyday relationships with more proximal adult authorities (4-H agents, volunteer leaders, teachers, principals, youth workers, counselors, coaches, and parents) that children come to adopt a basic belief that they live in a just society (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Our studies have focused on the teacher's role in this regard but the results apply broadly to adults who work with and are in some position of authority in their interactions with youth. In particular, we have argued that when teachers hold the same high standards for and respect the ideas of all students, insist that students listen to and respect one another, and actively intervene to stop any intolerant or uncivil acts, they play a critical role in promoting the younger generation's commitment to the kinds of public interest goals that would sustain a democratic polity, that is, contributing to their communities and serving their country, working to improve race relations, and helping the disenfranchised.

In sum, when adult volunteers who work with the 4-H clubs insist on a civic ethos in their groups, that is, that there is no tolerance of bullying, that inclusion, regardless of any kind of difference, is the basic policy of the organization, they go a long way in

developing a commitment to the principle of tolerance in the next generation. This, as the following quote from President Carter points out, is the principle on which our nation was founded. In his 1981 farewell address, President Carter said,

> "America did not invent human rights. In a very real sense it's the other way around. Human rights invented America. Ours was the first nation in the history of the world to be founded explicitly on such an idea."

Thus, by insisting on tolerance, adult volunteers can reinforce a very American idea.

In 4-H, many of today's leaders are actually members of the third and fourth generation of the original extension families. But adult volunteers also need to feel included, to feel that they have a voice in shaping the direction of the organization.This intergenerational continuity demonstrates their dedication to the traditions of 4-H and their belief in 'plowing back' into the organization.

According to the book, *4-H: An American Idea* by Thomas and Marilyn Wessel:

> "The vast array of projects and activities available to young people in 4-H would have been an empty promise without the help and guidance of an army of professional Extension agents and volunteer leaders. 4-H had always depended on the interest and good will of local people."

The Wessels' history also provides insights into the civic practices of an organization that can maximize the efficacy of the volunteer effort. In the late 1950s, attrition of adult volunteers had become a serious problem. Many dropped out after one year. When asked 'why' it became apparent that, if volunteer leaders were going to continue in their role, they wanted to feel:

a that they were integral to or a core part of the program and

b that they were not isolated, working alone in their communities. Rather, they wanted to feel that there was a collective purpose to their efforts, that they were part of a larger organization with a mission, an organization that supported local community efforts.

In response to these criticisms, leader forums and volunteer training became a part of the program—providing an opportunity for adult volunteers to exchange ideas and feel part of the larger mission of the organization.

Schools of democracy

Nearly 100 years ago Alexis de Tocqueville (1848/1966) observed that community associations in which citizens of all stripes worked through the issues and made decisions for their communities were the 'schools of democracy' in America. In a similar vein, contemporary scholars have argued that engagement in youth clubs and extracurricular activities provides hands-on training for citizenship (Verba et al., 1995). We list some specific skills that young people are likely to develop as members of youth groups that would qualify community youth development programs as nonformal 'schools of democracy.'

Many practices common in nonformal youth groups are opportunities for developing organizational skills. These include electing club leaders, deciding together and following through on group projects, often making decisions using parliamentary procedure and learning to resolve disagreements in a civil fashion. Thus, young people can learn how organizations operate such as how meetings are conducted and committee work is accomplished. In addition, the 'project' based structure of voluntary youth activities includes such things as goal setting, connecting concrete action steps to goal attainment, evaluating and learning from mistakes, and refining activities such that goals are more likely to be attained (Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, & Goldsmith, 1995).

In projects that involve studying the community, its history, and knowing its services and resources, young citizens can get a picture of some of the players with whom one would have to work to effect local change. Meeting and visiting with elected officials might help to "humanize" the bureaucracy or

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demystify politics. As a result public servants might seem less like politicians and more like fellow citizens whose job it is to serve the public. Youth may also come to believe that s/he has a right to hold those officials accountable to the public.

Community service

Community service presents another opportunity to expand the awareness of 'others' in the youth's community—their needs, conditions, customs, histories, contributions, and perspectives. An ethic of service is common to most community youth organizations and is the kind of practice that makes real the principles embodied in a pledge such as that of the 4-H organization—service to my club, my community, and my world.

When programs are well conceived, service can move young people beyond the confines of their world, expose them to the needs of the larger community and at the same time, enable communities to see youth as a resource rather than a liability. But these outcomes are not inevitable. Organizations can maximize the civic learning potential of service projects by making sure that the experience is not isolated but instead integral to both the lives of the youth and their communities. In other words, *service should not be random acts of kindness.* Rather, it should be a means whereby young people can form a sustained connection to their communities. Extant research on service learning suggests some key principles that can maximize the civic potential of such programs (Billig, 2000). These include meaningful (rather than busy work) activities, performed by and reflected on by groups rather than privately. The collective nature of the group reflection makes the content of the work and the community issue it addresses a public discussion. It raises service which could be a private act of charity to a level of public discourse.

Character education

Since 1995, the United States Department of Education has been providing grants to states under the Partnerships in Character Education Pilot Projects Program. Under this program, state education agencies work with local school districts to develop curricular materials, train teachers, and operate an information clearinghouse on character education. And nonformal programs such as 4-H in many states also have adopted character education programming. *Character Counts!* seems to be the most popular curriculum but character education encompasses a broad array of programs and we caution against generalizations. However, we note that the civic skills that future generations who will grapple with ethical and community issues need are not the skills taught in many character education programs. Instead many programs adopt a didactic approach, teaching a prescribed set of personal virtues which basically tell kids how to 'be good.' Instead of learning how to exercise good judgment, to weigh alternatives within particular situations, young people learn that this act is right and that one wrong.

The term, character, connotes a distinctive mark, quality or trait. It is exhibited when we face dilemmas and have to take a stand, deciding between different alternatives. Thus, the exercise of character implies a capacity for thoughtful inquiry, open mindedness, information gathering, and reflection. Character is the exercise of good judgment—when faced with a dilemma or decision it means deciding to do what is ethical, not the expedient or self-serving choice but the ethical one. However, the ethical decision is not always transparent. We can prepare children to make good judgments by developing a sense of right and wrong, by demonstrating the virtue of moral conduct, and by ourselves being models of the kinds of people we hope they will become. But the exercise of good judgment will be made by the individual within a particular situation. Questions of character cannot be reduced to simple rules about right and wrong.

To illustrate the difference, we draw from the open-ended responses of adolescents in one of our studies when we asked them to list the characteristics of a 'good citizen.' Whereas many listed passive or what we consider 'lowest common denominator'

qualities, (that is, someone who stayed out of trouble, didn't lie, cheat, or steal), others nominated as a 'good citizen' a proactive person who helped others, voted, contributed to the community, paid attention to current events, sought out information, and stood up for what s/he believed in.

In the videotape for *Character Counts!*, Mr. Josephson recommends that those who use the *Character Counts!* program stick to the six pillars. He warns us, "Don't go into areas where reasonable people differ." However, reasonable people differing on the best way to resolve issues in their community describes the democratic process. We submit that in the next century our children and their children will ultimately have to go into areas where "reasonable people disagree." Thus, we should prepare them to participate in deliberative discussions—the kind of discourse that is the essence of a democratic society.

There are hints about how to do that and we draw from a research that William Perry (1970) did almost thirty years ago. Perry was interested in the process of learning in college and how that process was related to college students' views on social, moral, and political dilemmas. He observed that, as freshmen, students are quite sure that they know what the truth is on most matters. In time, however, they discover new perspectives, what Perry referred to as a pluralism of ideas. If they are open-minded they will reflect on and rethink their own ideas. But that does not mean they become relativists, who make no ethical decisions. Rather, Perry observed that when faced with social and political dilemmas for which there are no easy answers, students considered various sides of an issue and ultimately made commitments and lived with the consequences. Notably, he found that students were better able to deal with uncertainty and still make commitments when they felt *a sense of community* with faculty and students who were also facing the challenges of pluralism.

Equity and access to civic opportunities

We close our paper with an appeal for equal access to community youth development programs. Socioeconomic inequalities in political participation are higher in the United States when compared to other democracies (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978). Might 4-H and other nonformal youth organizations be helping to perpetuate such inequities?

National studies indicate that 29% of early adolescents are not reached by community youth programs at all (U.S. Department of Education, 1990) and that youth from more advantaged families are more likely to be involved in such programs (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998). Even when programs do exist in disadvantaged communities, they tend to reach youth for far less time (one or two hours a week) than that needed to provide a sustained connection for them (Carnegie Corporation, 1992).

Future generations, 'traditional' programs

Interest and belief in the political process is at an all time low, especially among younger cohorts of Americans. At the same time, volunteerism in the community has become more normative among young people over the past decade (Sagawa, 1998). The results of an annual nationwide study of college freshmen, found that 81% of the class of 2000 had done volunteer work and 45.4% had participated in an organized demonstration but only 28.1% said that they were interested in keeping up with politics (Kellogg, 2001).

The disconnect of younger generations from the political process is of concern in a democracy like the United States. An even bigger issue in the diverse democracy that the 2000 Census paints is the possibility of unequal participation in the political process by different groups of citizens. There was a time when access to entry level jobs with the potential for mobility provided a bridge for those in disadvantaged communities to connect to mainstream America. That era is over

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In his latest book, Putnam (2000) points to the parallels between the conditions of life in the United States today and those at the turn of the last century. These include disparities in wealth, growing corporate power, waves of immigration and massive change in the demographics of the population, new forms of technology, commerce, and communication, and a restructured workplace. At the turn of the last century optimism about the potential for social change was balanced by pessimism about seemingly intractable social ills. But there was a boom in the building of community associations that revitalized the civic culture. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Americans created and joined an unprecedented number of voluntary associations, not the least of which were new youth organizations. In less than a decade (1901-1910) most of the nationwide youth organizations that were to dominate the 20th century were founded—the Boy and Girl Scouts, Campfire Girls, the 4-H, Boys Clubs and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers and Big Sisters and the American Camping Association (Putnam, 2000, p. 393).

We in the land-grant system in general and in 4-H in particular need to respond to calls such as Putnam's for more civic inventiveness. We need to take seriously the need for greater innovation in the development of youth programs that respond to and build on the wealth of assets of our increasingly diverse population of young people. ⌘

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