Youth Political Development: An Introduction

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Research on political socialization during the 1950s focused on early precursors of political attitudes and treated children as rather passive participants in the process. A second wave of research in the 1960s considered youth a force creating social change and held that the transition between adolescence and adulthood was a period uniquely suited to examining political issues. Developmental research during the past two decades has emphasized lifelong plasticity and the importance of the sociohistorical contexts in which children grow up. This change in views of development has occurred at a time when populations in all societies are becoming more diverse and when there have been dramatic economic and sociopolitical upheavals throughout the world. Thus there is a renewed importance for research on the political development of young people and the potential for examining this topic in increasingly meaningful ways. This issue highlights a new generation of research in this domain, paying particular attention to international and comparative work and to those studies that bring a fresh and developmental approach.

History of Research

Political participation by citizens is considered a prerequisite for successful democratic societies. And citizenship does, in fact, figure prominently in the mission statements of public schools and voluntary youth organizations. However, for more than two decades, research on the developmental correlates of civic competence or the processes whereby children become members of political communities has, to say the least, not been a prominent theme in the social sciences. Only 14 of

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1,000 manuscripts published in the most prominent journals on political behavior in
the mid-1980s touched on the topic of political socialization (Sears, 1990). Publica-
tions on this topic are even more scarce in the developmental science literature.

However, there is a body of relevant work from the 1950s. Interest in the
developmental roots of political attitudes and identities tends to increase during
periods when there are heightened concerns about the stability of democratic
regimes, and the work during the 1950s reflected postwar concerns about the dura-
ability of fledgling democracies that emerged after the war. This research also rep-
resented the dominant developmental dogma of the time, namely, that the
individual's developmental path was fixed by experiences early in life (see Brim &
Kagan, 1980). This earlier body of work focused on the developmental roots of dif-
fuse support for political systems, the processes that engender such support, and
how it is transferred across generations. Consistent with the paradigms of that era,
children were conceived as rather passive participants in the political socialization
process. Early childhood was the period of interest because investigators con-
tended that political loyalties were learned early in life because children idealized
public authorities as benevolent parent figures and placed their trust in those lead-
ers (Easton & Dennis, 1969).

A second wave of research was conducted during the 1960s and 1970s when the
historical convergence of social movements challenging the status quo (e.g., the
civil rights, antiwar, free speech, and women's movements) was met with concerns
about political stability and theories about intergenerational differences in core val-
ues. Investigators concentrated on late adolescents and young adults, age groups
that disproportionately filled the ranks of the social movements of the era. Research
on life span development, in opposition to the previous dominant focus on early
development, was beginning to demonstrate the potential for lifelong change and
the importance of the sociopolitical and historical context to psychological devel-
opment. In fact, a consistent theme of research from that era was that the time of
transition between adolescence and adulthood was a period uniquely suited to
examining social issues. Drawing from Mannheim (1952), scholars argued that
because youth were not fully integrated into societal roles and responsibilities they
were free to experiment, to search for a direction in their own lives and, in the
process, question the conditions of their social order. Whereas political socializa-
tion theory focused on intergenerational stability in political loyalties, the genera-
tional perspective concentrated on the role of generational replacement in driving
social change as well as the significance of historical events in distinguishing
generations.

Debate continues on the question of when, or in some cases, whether political
positions crystallize, but this work demonstrated that the years between 14 and 25
are a period of great flexibility and openness. They are also a time when societies
typically focus on the civic preparation of the next generation (Niemi & Hepburn,
1995). Likewise, because identity consolidation is a core developmental task of the
adolescent and young adult years, psychologists have argued that adult personali-
ties are shaped in part by the way people grapple with and resolve social issues of
salience during this developmental period (Stewart & Healy, 1989). Hence, this
research is important not only to understanding the growth of political participation
but also to examining basic psychological processes at the transition to adulthood.
Studies of personal attributes have demonstrated that stability is achieved only after
age 30 (Costa & McCrae, 1994). Thus young adults’ grappling with political issues
becomes an important aspect of understanding the persons they come to be.

In his interview studies with political activists of the 1960s, Keniston (1968)
described the early adult years as a politically defining period. He suggested that,
whereas adolescence is a time when one examines membership in families and
questions the authority of parents, early adulthood is often a period when society
replaces the family as the source of examination. This “fresh contact” with their
society, to borrow Mannheim’s (1928/1952) phrase, that typifies the transition to
adulthood may benefit the polity if, as Keniston claims,

> those who have had a youth—who have seriously questioned their relationship to the com-
    munity that exists, who have a self and a set of commitments independent of their social
    role—are never likely to be simple patriots, unquestioning conformists, or blind loyalists to
    the status quo. (Keniston, 1968, p. 272)

The generational studies emphasized the active, evaluative role of young people in
negotiating the political realities of their social order and in creating change in the
process. Thus, studies that followed up some of the activists of the 1960s’ move-
ments suggest that the values and commitments youth adopted during that period
endured into their middle adult years in both their political activity (Fendrich &
Lovoy, 1988; Marwell, Aiken, & Demerath, 1987) and parenting practices (Franz
& McClelland, 1994).

We believe it is time again to stimulate interest in the developmental correlates
of citizenship and politics. This issue of the *Journal of Social Issues* points to a
resurgence of research on this topic (see also Haste & Torney-Purta, 1992; Niemi &
Hepburn, 1995) as well as to the insights that can be gained from international stud-
ies. The articles present fresh theoretical approaches, take advantage of new para-
digms in developmental research, and remind us of how prominently the theme of
youth and politics figures in social change. We hope that the issue generates discus-
sion and motivates more work on this topic.

### A New Developmental Orientation to Research

Life span research promoting lifelong plasticity and the importance of contex-
tual factors has been accepted as a mainstream developmental orientation, even for
studies of childhood (Hetherington, Lerner, & Perlmutter, 1986). The opportunities
for developmental research on the late adolescent and young adult years—in terms
of the ideas, methods, measures, and analytic techniques—are vastly greater than a
decade or two ago, combining ideas and methods from child and adult life span developmental research. Hence, the potential for serious developmental examination of topics such as political ideologies, values, civic identity, and social responsibility is vastly different than in the past. The work presented in this issue takes advantage of this new developmental potential.

The World as a Laboratory for Research

The need for attention to political development as an aspect of human development is underscored by the continuing process of globalization and various socio-political responses to it. Because of this trend, the world is becoming a natural laboratory for examining issues of political development as they intersect with changing social conditions and historical events. Nation-states are being challenged from within by ethnic and religious divisions and by regional economic mergers (e.g., the European Union) from without. These trends pose important questions about how citizenship and nationality will be defined in the future. What is the community to which children develop civic loyalties and owe allegiance and what are the processes whereby they develop a sense of membership in and commitment to its values? In a global context, do ethnic origins lose their meaning or do those roots become more important in defining in-group loyalties and out-group prejudices? And, in a world linked by telecommunications, travel, and cultural exchange, can we agree on the skills that a global citizen will need and develop appropriate means of providing youth with opportunities to develop such competencies?

Changing Economic Opportunities for Youth

The changing place of youth in the life course and in relation to the global economy also needs research attention. The global economics of multinational corporations have resulted in the transfer of well-paid, low-skilled jobs from the first world to the lower wage jobs of the third world. As a result, there are fewer opportunities for secure employment in the developed world for those with little formal education. Increasing economic disparities between poor and rich undermine political stability because large numbers of the population lose their vested interest in the commonwealth as well as their trust in its leaders. Civic disaffection and the lack of social integration, especially in the younger generation, result.

The lack of entry-level jobs in developed countries has posed problems for youth at the transition to adulthood. This period has become a protracted one in postindustrial societies, leaving many with no clear social niche (Cote & Allahar, 1995). Compared to earlier generations, today’s youth are less able to support a family and set down roots in a community. Such factors are related to having a vested interest in civic affairs. Younger generations also face futures with fewer guarantees from the state as governments chip away the social welfare contracts that have
bound generations of citizens with their societies. The social integration of each new generation can be a relatively smooth process if the rules remain the same; that is, we can expect young people to develop loyalties and a sense of obligation to a community that treats them as full members. However, in a context where entitlements are being eroded and the principles of the market increasingly govern social relations, it is hardly surprising that personal rights have become disconnected from public goods and community obligations. The increase in youth depression and suicide are some consequences of the displaced nature of this age period (Cote & Allahar). The epidemic of youth violence is yet another manifestation of this alienation. In sum, globalization has implications for the transition from adolescence to adulthood. It affects the opportunities, the socioemotional development, indeed the timing and structure of that transition. In our view there is a political dimension of youth development implied in these trends as well.

Implications of Social Change for Youths’ Political and Civic Development

Concerns have been voiced that gaining private wealth has taken precedence over the commonwealth (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Wolfe, 1989) and that individualist trends are both challenging the authority of the state (Merelman, 1986) and eroding the associational networks that are the social integuments of a strong civil society (Putnam, 1995). Even prominent financiers warn that open democratic societies are jeopardized if the principles of free enterprise and survival of the fittest are the only ones we live by (Soros, 1996).

Although the relationship between political activity and social status has been stronger in the United States than in other modern democracies (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978), growing income disparities during the past decade have exacerbated the disaffection felt by citizens. In their survey of participation in American civic and political life, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) concluded that economic advantage and the social capital associated with it are the most significant predictors of such involvement. Yet despite the disproportionate numbers of middle-class and wealthy citizens who get involved, a significant proportion of political participation is motivated out of concerns for social justice and the commonwealth rather than out of narrow self-interest (Jennings, 1991). How do such attitudes and motivation for action develop? That is one of the developmental questions addressed in this issue.

The Present Issue

This issue departs from the framework that others have referred to as “marketplace democracy,” where citizens are seen as consumers of government rather than producers of civic life (Boyte & Kari, 1996). There is relatively little attention to formal government, partisan politics, or elections. Undeniably, these aspects of politics affect the conditions of childrens’ lives; yet they are often not salient for young
people, especially those from working-class and poor families (Bhavnani, 1991; Torney-Purta, 1990). In contrast, the articles in this issue address developmental topics such as identity, values, voluntarism, morality, and intergroup relations and reframe them as issues of youth political development. They consider ways that adolescents develop as members of political communities and feel a sense of meaning in and ultimately obligations to those communities. They also deal with the implications of social change for democratic societies.

The focus of the issue is on the developmental roots of political ideologies and civic involvement and the factors related to those outcomes. Political ideas and perspectives do not suddenly emerge at the age of majority. Rather, they are the product of social relations and activities engaged in during the course of development (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, values are a standard people use to organize their political beliefs (Kinder & Sears, 1985) and the foundation of values is developmental. Likewise, civic involvement in adulthood can be traced to experiences of group membership and engagement in the adolescent years (Verba et al., 1995; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). The contributors to this issue concentrate on the years between 14 and 25, an age range others have suggested as the most appropriate for examining the development of political understanding (Niemi & Hepburn, 1995), and one that is receiving increasing research interest.

The first section of this issue presents new theoretical perspectives on the topic of youth and politics. In the opening article of the section, Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, and Sheblanova argue that experiences of membership in and obligation to a common good are the ties that bind adolescents to the broader polity. They contend that politics, like other aspects of social cognition, are rooted in social relations and employ the metaphor of a social contract to discuss adolescents' views of the bargain that binds members of a polity together. Drawing on data from a seven-nation study of adolescents, they point to the formative role that a family ethic of social responsibility plays in the development of civic commitments. In addition, they find that, compared to their male compatriots, females are more likely to be engaged in volunteer work and are also more likely to hear messages of social responsibility emphasized in their families.

In the second article, Rosenthal, Feiring, and Lewis present a prospective study of community and political volunteering for a sample of adolescents in the United States. Drawing from their longitudinal data, they assess the role of early childhood and family climate factors as well as contemporaneous factors in predicting the likelihood that adolescents will get involved in various forms of volunteer work.

Adolescents' engagement in community service is the focus of the next article in this section. Yates and Youniss present the reflections of participants in a high school class on social justice who volunteer at a community soup kitchen as part of their class. The young people's experiences in the soup kitchen become fodder for political discussions in class. Yates and Youniss contend that participatory experiences such as community service afford opportunities for youth to confront the
problems of their society and to construct a political identity in the process. In an Eriksonian sense, community service can be an opportunity for adolescents to envision the kinds of people they want to become and the kind of society they want to create.

Rediscovering membership in and obligations to the commonwealth have been central in the discourse on community service. Rifkin (1995) argues that in the context of global change, voluntary organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and civic groups will form an essential third sector, that is, the "social economy" that will compensate for the private and public sectors' failures, challenge their methods of resource allocation, and build the competencies of ordinary citizens working together in the process. If future generations are going to participate in this social economy, we need to activate discussions among social scientists, educators, public officials, policy makers, and citizens about how schools and community organizations can contribute.

The second section of the issue includes two studies of moral development. In the first article Hart, Atkins, and Ford present a model of moral identity development and test the model with data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in the United States. They frame moral identity as a personal commitment to actions benefiting others and in this sense echo the themes of common good and civic obligation in earlier articles. Hart and his colleagues contend that the voluntary sector affords an opportunity for the development of moral identity and decry the absence of institutions in poor, urban neighborhoods that would link young people to such opportunities.

The next article in this section considers moral development in the context of moral reasoning. Based on surveys of large samples of adolescents and young adults in the Netherlands, Raaijmakers, Verhagt, and Vollebergh uncover two distinct dimensions of political beliefs, an economic and a cultural dimension. The former concerns an individual's attitudes about economic disparities and distributive justice and the latter his/her tolerance for social and cultural differences. Raaijmakers and his colleagues find that higher levels of moral reasoning are related to the cultural dimension but not to the economic dimension of political beliefs. This article raises important questions about the development of social tolerance and concepts of justice in young people and what roles moral reasoning, perspective taking, and compassion might play.

As previously stated, the need for attention to the developmental correlates of citizenship is underscored by political changes in the evolving democracies of the world. The articles in the third section focus on young people growing up in fledgling democracies or in the throes of social and political change. The transition to a market economy in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Hungary is the theme of the first article by Macek, Flanagan, Gallay, Kostron, Botcheva, and Csapo. Despite the Western euphoria over market transformations, youths' perceptions of those changes are tempered by variables such as gender and their endorsement of socialist
or liberal values. The authors point out the gendered implications of the transition from a socialist to a capitalist economy and find that female adolescents were more likely than their male compatriots to voice concerns that economic disparities were increasing in their country. However, attitudes about the social welfare role of the state were stronger than gender in predicting youths’ perceptions of increasing economic disparities. Across all three countries, youth who considered the provision of social welfare the state’s obligation were more concerned that disparities were increasing in their country.

In the next article, Finchilescu and Dawes compare the perceptions of political change of several age and racial/ethnic groups of South African adolescents. Attitudes toward the new democracy are rooted in the apartheid practices that privileged and stereotyped various racial and ethnic groups as well as in the relative advantage that groups expect to enjoy in the new society. By placing the perceptions of several cohorts of young people in a historical context the authors shed light on the contested nature of politics. They point out how relative positions of privilege are related to youths’ confidence in and identification with the political system and the future of their country. Like those before them, this generation of young people have had little practice in the everyday activities that sustain a democracy. Furthermore, as Finchilescu and Dawes caution, the success of the democratic transformation depends on a favorable and timely redistribution of the economic advantages and a renegotiation of the power enjoyed by White minority groups under the old system.

Intergroup relations and the correlates of tolerance are the concerns of the next article in this section. Boehnke, Hagan, and Hefler present a developmental argument about the correlates of xenophobia. Surveys of adolescents from East and West Berlin reveal the powerful role of what the authors refer to as “hierarchic self-interest” in young people’s hostility toward foreigners. Although males hold stronger antiforeigner attitudes than their female peers, this gender difference is mediated by the males’ rabid commitment to competition and winning. Because these attitudes are less stable in early adolescence, intervention should be targeted at those years. Boehnke and his colleagues also find that adolescents with lower self-esteem are less likely to harbor negative attitudes toward foreigners.

The theme of young people growing up in the midst of political upheaval continues in the final article in this section. Jean Whyte discusses the politicization of youth in Northern Ireland and provides a social and historical backdrop that suggests that Catholic and Protestant youth have grown up in separate and unequal worlds. In the “Pathways Project” Whyte has followed, since they were twelve years old, youth in West and East Belfast who are now late adolescents and young adults. She compares the feelings of national identity, discussions of politics in families, and visions of the future for the two groups and interprets their perceptions in light of changing political dynamics in Northern Ireland.

As a set, the articles in the third section remind us that civic skills in emerging democracies do not arise fully formed in a population by virtue of its holding free
elections or tearing down the Berlin Wall. Years of subjugation and of client-patron relationships as the modus operandi do not suddenly give way to egalitarian and democratic styles of negotiation and interaction. The work of building democracies takes time, and transformations in the practices of developmental settings are necessary prerequisites to nurture democratic dispositions in the population. The current status of such transformations is far from clear, however. The observation of Macek and his colleagues—that youth are trying to find a social niche at the same time that their entire societies are searching for a new identity—could be applied to this generation of young people in each of the nations discussed in this third section.

In a concluding commentary, William Damon highlights the overarching themes of the issue and offers some important suggestions for future research and policy. The articles in this issue address the developmental processes whereby adolescents become politically active members of the societies in which they live and the attitudes and beliefs that underlie such activity (or inactivity). Particularly in today’s world, political participation, broadly conceived as it is in this issue, may well be the most important domain of human development, certainly as critical as parenting, mating, and the other areas that have received the lion’s share of research attention. This issue is, therefore, way overdue. We hope it will contribute to a new wave of developmental research and of policy attention to this topic.

References


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