Conference Report

Sociopolitical Development and Positive Youth Development: Emerging Themes from the 2014
Youth Civic Engagement Preconference from the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research
on Adolescence

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Over the past decade, civic engagement has been gaining ground as a topic of interest at

developmental research meetings such as the Society for Research on Adolescence (SRA) and

the Society for Research on Child Development (SRCD). The rising visibility of research on

youth civic engagement aligns with calls for recognition of civic engagement as a mainstream

developmental task on par with other important life domains (Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2009). In

tandem with the rising tide of civic engagement research, five Youth Civic Engagement

Preconference meetings have convened from 2008 to 2014[1], offering a forum for diverse groups

of scholars to coalesce and energize around pursuing key research questions regarding youth

civic engagement. A cornerstone of the meetings has been the mix of scholars and practitioners

in attendance, reflecting a unifying goal of this network to have our understanding of youth civic

engagement informed by both science and practice. Here we report on key themes that emerged

during the preconference meeting in March 2014 at SRA's Biennial Meeting in Austin, Texas.

Past preconference meetings have taken up central questions related to reaching

consensus on the definition of civic engagement, identifying developmental roots and outcomes

of civic engagement, and exploring the roles of various contexts in supporting civic

development. These valuable questions have been mostly situated within the broader Positive

Youth Development (PYD) perspective, which articulates key individual and contextual supports

that facilitate youth thriving and positive contributions to community and society (Benson,

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[1] These meetings have been made possible by a range of generous sponsors: 2008 SRA meeting (MacArthur Foundation Grant to C. Flanagan), 2009 SRCD meeting (Spencer Foundation Grant to C. Flanagan), 2010 SRA meeting (SRA Study Group Grant to the Youth Civic Development Network), 2011 SRCD Meeting (Stanford Center on Adolescence and W. Damon), 2014 SRA Meeting (John Templeton Foundation Grant to L.Wray-Lake).

Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). The 2014 preconference theme of sociopolitical development was inspired by SRA's conference theme of social justice. One goal of keynote speaker Roderick Watts was to articulate tensions between PYD (with emphasis on developmental assets and research primarily focused on majority youth) and sociopolitical development (with theoretical roots in liberation psychology and research primarily focused on ethnic minority youth; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). An equally important goal was to recognize points of integration between these two perspectives. Watts challenged us to expand the field's vision of civic engagement so that the civic ideology and actions of oppressed youth do not get relegated to the margins.

The idea of personally responsible citizenship emphasizes civic acts such as volunteering or voting along with trust and conventional civic knowledge: this view of citizenship is aligned with the PYD perspective and represents the mainstream approach to youth civic engagement. According to Watts, the dominant paradigm of the personally responsible citizen is largely silent on structural injustices that are an ongoing fact of life for marginalized young people. He argues for the inclusion of knowledge and skills for resisting injustice. In particular, critical social analysis provides a way for disenfranchised youth to understand the systems of oppression that operate in their day-to-day lives and it contributes to a strategy for taking action to change these structures. Critical social analysis, an element of critical consciousness, entails critically examining accepted ways of thinking and feeling, and recognizing how existing social structures perpetuate inequality (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). Civic engagement conceptualized from a PYD perspective does not reject notions of empowerment, recognition of social inequality, social justice, and social identity, but research is weak on their articulation and incorporation into models. Similarly, past critiques have noted PYD's avoidance of the political sphere and failure

to adequately recognize the political potential of youth (Flanagan, Syvertsen, & Wray-Lake, 2007). Thus, scholars need to step out of PYD or broaden this perspective to better incorporate critical consciousness and social justice activism more fully into the definition of youth civic engagement. One way forward may entail recognizing (through theory as well as research) that there is not one version of "citizenship" but instead multiple valid pathways to meaningful civic life. Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) work may offer common ground in articulating typologies that include both personally responsible and justice-oriented expressions of civic engagement.

Watts also challenged us to consider areas of integration between PYD and sociopolitical development perspectives. He highlighted the ways that youth community organizing (YCO) cultivates and draws upon many of the developmental assets emphasized in the positive youth development framework while working toward challenging oppression. One key construct bridging PYD and YCO is leadership. Leadership is widely recognized as an asset by school and community programs like 4-H, and YCO groups often entail cultivating leadership skills to enable effective public speaking and skills of persuasion. Examples from Watts' ongoing ethnographic research illustrated that youth community organizers commonly mix PYD and sociopolitical development language in their discussions, underscoring that youth themselves do not view skills in silos.

Several critiques and challenges for research in sociopolitical development were articulated during the preconference session, primarily led by discussants Brian Christens and James Youniss. One research challenge involves the need to synthesize across similar lines of inquiry. For example, sociopolitical development theory, which comes from a developmental psychology perspective, overlaps considerably with empowerment theory housed in community psychology; there are perhaps more similarities than differences in these perspectives yet

research remains separate. Second, good measures of critical social analysis, empowerment, and other related sociopolitical development constructs are sorely lacking, preventing growth in our understanding of these concepts. Fortunately, measurement of these constructs is an active area of research for several scholars (Christens, Peterson, & Speer, 2011; Diemer & Li, 2011). Third, related to theory and measurement, research should better distinguish between cognitive and emotional components of sociopolitical motivations. For example, Christens, Collura, and Tahir (2013) suggest that few people possess both critical cognition *and* an emotional sense of hopefulness, despite conceptualization that critical awareness of injustice paired with hope for change would ideally combine to motivate civic action. Finally, Dr. Youniss urged us to consider the sociohistorical context and systems-level barriers to YCO. For example, disenfranchised youth often live in "political dead-spots" populated by fewer civic organizations and less political talk. In such places, coalitions of churches may become key players in bringing necessary people and resources to the table to address injustices. Thus, systems-level analyses must be considered in concert with efforts to understand youth's sociopolitical development. Analyses of successful organizing efforts (e.g., Warren, 2001) and social movements may be helpful in this regard.

Our session concluded with small group round-table discussions. Many future research directions and applications emerged in these lively conversations, but two compelling themes were especially prominent and help to prompt further theoretical debate and guide future research. First, how do critical consciousness and related developmental processes differ across cultural contexts? For example, does critical consciousness look different (or develop differently) for privileged white youth, rural marginalized youth, or youth who experience racial/ethnic discrimination? These questions have corresponding measurement questions: Can we identify a

universal way to measure critical consciousness or would context-specific measures best represent diverse pathways to critical social analysis?

The second set of compelling questions is especially relevant for program developers and practitioners: What is the role of adults across settings in facilitating sociopolitical development? For example, what are the differential effects of adult-driven versus youth-driven activities on successful youth outcomes? Growing evidence already suggests the utility of youth-adult partnerships for fostering civic engagement and positive outcomes (e.g., Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005), but new challenges may emerge in striking the right partnership in political organizing efforts. In school settings, how can teachers integrate multiple view points, recognizing their own ideology while appreciating different views? And, how do we identify and overcome the political barriers to discussing politics in schools? Our knowledge in this area is growing (e.g., Hess, 2009), and there is considerable room for further research on sociopolitical development in schools.

Perhaps we have concluded with more questions than answers, but nonetheless the preconference meeting represented a step toward greater synthesis across theoretical perspectives that inform civic engagement research. Although progress can be challenging, we believe that conference attendees were revitalized to pursue the shared goal of finding positive, productive, and meaningful ways for *all* youth to be civically engaged. Notably, students and junior scholars have always led the preconference meetings and many young scholars attend. The field of civic engagement is gaining momentum as a new generation of scholars takes up interest in this topic. Our hope is that these rich intellectual exchanges continue and expand beyond North America, so that theories of civic development can remain as dynamic as youth themselves.

Bio Sketches

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