Title of program: Voluntary Civic Engagement among College Students: Ecological and Cross-Cultural Contexts

Type of program: Symposium
Length of program: 1 hr. 50 min.

General statement: Civic engagement among university students is generally found in two formats. The first channel is through community-based learning, which is the incorporation of service learning or community-based student projects into academic curricula. This is typically initiated by university faculty. The second channel is community service, or voluntary work that is for the most part initiated by students (Niemi, Hepburn and Chapman, 2000). This can be, for example, by joining community service clubs on campus. Literature on university students’ civic engagement has focused primarily on community-based learning, whereas student initiated civic engagement has been largely overlooked. The small number of recently-published studies that have examined student-initiated activities have tended to be exploratory, using small-sample qualitative designs with American students. These studies have associated civic engagement with greater psychological wellness and increased commitment to community participation and service.

The aims of this symposium are to broaden the scope of knowledge related to voluntary student civic engagement while examining on a deeper level the impact of multiple ecological contexts including socio-economic, environmental, and social influences. To that end, the panel introduces six timely and creative research studies. A variety of research methods are utilized across these studies, including interviews, focus groups, psychometric instrument development, large-sample surveys, hypothesis-testing, and quasi-experimental design. These studies investigate students’ motivations and challenges when engaging in voluntary civic engagement and correlates of such engagement ranging from the individual level (e.g., academic performance, mental health) to the macro-level. Also explored are the complex relationships between voluntary and required civic engagement. Intersections of multicultural and cross-cultural issues are examined, especially as studies include samples of Asian-American and Egyptian students as well as students who completed multicultural learning courses in psychology. Recommendations for enhancing civic engagement among college students are interwoven throughout the symposium, along with implications for future research directions.

Chair:
Mona M Amer, PhD
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Title of presentation 1:  
Voluntary Civic Engagement in the DotNet Generation

Participant 1:  
Maggie L. Syme, PhD, VA Boston Healthcare System, Boston, MA

Coauthor(s):  
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Summary:  
Civic engagement has been defined as, “the expanse of activities, in which participation in social life with other citizens takes place, involving the pursuit of common goals related to the betterment of the community” (Sobieraj, 2006). Research suggests that rates of engagement have been declining in the past 50 years, particularly among young adults (Putnam, 2000). This presentation will outline two projects that examined voluntary civic engagement in 18-25 year-olds, labeled Dot-Nets.

An initial step in answering the question, “Why are people civically engaged?” includes understanding who contributes to civil society and what factors motivate them to continue. Select factors such as social status, availability of resources, and previous civic involvement have been identified as contributing to civic engagement (Bekkers, 2005), but yet to be studied is an ecological approach that combines demographics with external and internal constructs such as motivation and family influence. The first study investigated the development of civic participation in ten college students through a qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and analysis consisted of open, axial, and selective coding, as indicated by grounded theory. Categories and interconnections were identified among responses to describe pathways to voluntary civic engagement in college students, such as environmental influences, planned happenstance, and perceived inequality.

As mentioned, few studies have examined psychological factors in generating voluntary civic engagement. The second study investigates the contribution of psychological and social well-being to individual levels of civic engagement in DotNets. A pilot study was conducted in order to construct a psychometrically sound measure of civic engagement by implementing factor and reliability analyses and was utilized in the subsequent data collection. Participants from a large national sample were administered surveys designed to assess civic engagement, psychological and social well-being, and various identifying factors. Results of the predictive models suggest that social well-being did have a significant impact on civic engagement at the subscale level.
Title of presentation 2:
A Population-Specific Theory of Civic Engagement for Asian-American College Students

Participant 2:
Wing Yi Chan, MA, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL

Summary:
Using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999), the primary goal of the present study is to develop a theoretical framework to identify what factors promote and/or hinder civic engagement among Asian American college students. Research has consistently found positive effects of family (Torney-Purta et al., 2007), school (Flanagan et al., 2007), and community (Flanagan et al., 2007) on promoting youth civic engagement. However, only one study from the field of psychology has specifically studied the civic development of Asian American youth (Junn & Masuoka, 2008). It is unclear whether family, school, and community factors would have the same effects on Asian American college students’ civic engagement. Studies on Asian American adults’ political participation and Asian American college students’ campus activism suggest that the collective historical, social, and political experiences have great implications for promoting Asian American college students’ civic engagement (Junn & Masuoka, 2008; Rhoads et al., 2002).

Thus, semi-structured interviews were used to explore whether family, school, and community would influence students’ decision to participate in civic activities and whether Asian Americans’ collective historical, cultural, social, and political experiences have an impact on their civic engagement. Fourteen Asian American college students have participated in the study. Preliminary analyses suggest that Asian American college students participate in a variety of civic activities, including voting, organizing political protests, volunteering at community-based agencies, and participating in student organizations. Findings also highlight the importance of participants’ race, ethnicity, and immigration experience in their pathways to and forms of civic engagement. Although all participants identify as individuals of Asian descent, their civic engagement experiences vary depending on their immigration status and gender. In addition to theoretical implications, findings from this study can contribute to the development of programs that are designed to promote Asian American youth civic engagement.
Title of presentation 3:
The Marginalized Empowering the Marginalized: Egyptian Youths’ Voices on Civic Engagement

Participant 3:
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Summary:
In the Cairo metropolis, the experience of youth initiated civic engagement is unique due to various socio-economic factors. The recent shift from charity oriented practice towards practices aiming at transformative change means limited expertise in the area. Moreover, a cultural context where youth are often dependent on their families and larger social structures often means undervaluing the importance of youth initiated efforts. Literature on civic engagement and particularly youth initiatives is very limited. These factors mean lack of structural and expert support to youth civic leaders. The purpose of this research project is thus to develop an overview of youth initiated civic engagement practices in Cairo, Egypt. A culturally sensitive understanding and evaluation of these practices is critical in order to enhance and empower such initiatives that promote well-being within a developing country like Egypt.

Six focus groups were conducted with representatives of student-led community service clubs at a private liberal arts university in Cairo, Egypt. Club activities focused on, for example, community development, education for refugees, and environmental development. Topics explored in the focus groups included motivations for engaging in the community service, benefits and challenges faced, and impact of the experience on inter- and intra-personal development. The focus groups were digitally audio-recorded, manually transcribed, and analyzed using qualitative thematic coding.

Preliminary results show that members of these community service clubs show an increased sense of commitment to their communities (particularly disadvantaged groups) as well as numerous pathways for personal growth. Yet they also reported feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of situations and logistical challenges they were exposed to in their encounters with marginalized areas of Cairo. Based on the results, researchers aim at developing a comprehensive set of recommendations for better practices targeting youth civic leaders at the university level. Moreover, further research is recommended to evaluate similarities and challenges with government universities.

Electronic archiving:
Title of presentation 4:  
Who are the Civic Engagers? Psychological, Academic, and Community-Level Correlates

Participant 4:  
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Summary:  
Previous literature suggests that students who participate in voluntary civic engagement demonstrate higher self esteem (Anderson, 2003), lower levels of anxiety and depression (Swaner, 2007), academic achievement (Astin, 2000), and an increased sense of social responsibility (Ngai, 2006) as compared to students who do not volunteer. However, previous studies rarely examined more than a few of these variables at one time and typically utilized qualitative methods including small-sample focus groups and interviews. Additionally, most studies were conducted within a Western context.

The present study diverges from previous literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the correlates of voluntary civic engagement among a large sample of university students in the Middle East. Approximately 650 students at a private university in Egypt completed a series of questionnaires either by paper or at an Internet website. They were asked the extent to which they participate in voluntary civic engagement activities, including how often they volunteer, the types of activities they engage in, and in which ways do they volunteer (e.g., through student organizations, individual involvement, etc).

The study analyzed the relationship of numerous variables to voluntary civic engagement, comparing students who were engaged in such activities with those who were not. These variables fell in the following categories: psychological wellbeing, academic performance, interpersonal relationships, sense of community, and civic responsibility. Psychological instruments assessed levels of stress, depression, and anxiety. Participants’ academic performance was evaluated by asking their grade point averages. Student interpersonal relationships were examined by asking questions related to family, peers, and overall social wellbeing. Sense of community at the university level and organizational affiliation were measured, along with behavioral indicators such as participation in other campus activities. The study also included questions related to sense of community with the larger Cairo society and commitment to civic service. Suggestions and implications for future research will be provided.
Title of presentation 5:
Why Get Involved? –Service Learning and Community Participation in Emerging Adults

Participant 5:
Lorraine M. Gutierrez, PhD, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI

Summary:
Research on civic engagement has found that adolescents and emerging adults in the United States are actively involved in community service and volunteer activities. The motivations for community participation varies, and can reflect such factors as school requirements, family expectations, or alternative sentencing for criminal activities. The current research on the topic of youth civic engagement has not investigated what may motivate this type of civic engagement and what may predict different types of participation.

This paper reports results from a quasi-experimental study on the experiences of 900 undergraduate students taking multicultural learning courses in psychology. Students in four courses, using different types of pedagogy, participated in this study. Two of the courses, a community service learning course and an intergroup dialogue course, used experiential methods. One course covered the same type of content with a traditional didactic approach. The fourth course was a comparison group of students in an introductory psychology courses. All students completed pre and post tests to measure the impact of these courses. A number of demographic, attitudinal, and motivational measures were also measured in order to identify mediating and moderating factors.

Research on service learning suggests that these courses encourage future community service. This study considers how previous community participation among students in all four courses predicts an interest in future service at the end of the course. Results from multivariate analyses of these data suggest that the relationship between participation in service learning and intention to participate is not linear and is affected by a number of other factors, such as motivations and previous involvement in community activities. This suggests the need for future research on community participation that investigates more complex relationships between different types of service.
Discussant 1:
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