

## CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

# Media and Civic Socialization of Youth

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Research on the development of citizenship has been reinvigorated by considering adolescents as participants actively engaged in, and interacting with, family, peers, teachers, and the media. This contrasts with earlier top-down transmission models that saw adolescents as passive recipients of information from parents and teachers. Active citizenship is now seen as a largely indirect result of contextualized knowledge and cognitive skills learned from news media use, interpersonal communication, and active participation in school and community volunteer activities. The processes of active citizenship learning are an important part of the moral development of adolescents and young adults. © *Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2000*

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The development of citizenship in young people is the focus of the field of political socialization (1).

Voter turnout, as one among many criteria of participation, averaged 37% in the age 18–24 category in the past three presidential elections; this was 21% lower than among all citizens (2). This level compares unfavorably with three earlier elections, 1972–1980, when the age 18–24 years group aver-

aged 44% and was 17% below that of all citizens, respectively. Political knowledge among the young is similarly low. The extent and adequacy of political learning for young people between the ages of 14 and 25 years are thus brought into question.

The urgency of providing answers to questions of how citizenship develops is underscored by these growing practical concerns about democracy and civic life. Unresolved theoretical issues in developmental psychology, political science, and communication also converge on political or civic socialization as an area of research.

Recent research has shifted emphasis from an earlier view of adolescents as passive recipients of teaching from family, schools, and media to conceptions of youth as participants actively engaged in the world around them, sometimes trying out roles in anticipation of adulthood. It is now more focused on dynamic aspects of civic socialization, including studying intervention programs and strategies that would stimulate and deepen the level of civic engagement among youth. If successful, these programs may not only improve community life, but also benefit the moral development of the young people involved. By providing opportunities for developing social competence and connections to the community, such programs may serve to consolidate youth identities.

## *Historical Background*

Starting with Herbert Hyman's book in 1959 (3) and stimulated by a 1965 volume of *The Annals* (4), there came a tide of research that lasted for only a decade and then dried up. The early research reflected Roberta Sigel's (4) definition of political socialization as "the process by which persons learn to adopt the norms, values, attitudes, and behaviors accepted and

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*practiced by the ongoing (political) system.*" This definition and the research that followed clearly reflected the historical-political circumstances of the period: the quiescence of the Eisenhower presidency (1952–1960) and the Cold War concern with the new postwar democracies.

With the benefit of 30 years' hindsight, we see the shaky assumptions underlying this definition. What was thought necessary for citizens to learn was a single set of facts, beliefs and behaviors reflecting a unified political system. The agencies entrusted with socialization—first the family, then the schools, and later the news media—would act as conduits in transmitting to the neophyte citizens what mature citizens knew and practiced. The young would move steadily and irreversibly toward positive political maturity. Measurement of knowledge and other criteria functional to the political system was thought to be nonproblematic and objective.

The role of the news media was clear in the early model of citizenship. It was to provide facts allowing mature citizens to update previous knowledge learned from parents and school. Little attention was paid to assessing the actual influences of media or to analyzing the influence of varying patterns of interpersonal communication in adolescents' families and peer groups.

Unfortunately, this top-down transmission model did not fit well, and changes in contemporary society have made it even less applicable. Although the early research showed modestly increasing levels of political knowledge and supportive attitudes when comparing younger and older adolescents, little of the variance within each age group could be attributed to the child's modeling the behavior of the parent. Schools fared even worse than parents as agents of political learning. Although the educational attainment of young adults was a good predictor of political knowledge generally, more specific studies of adolescents in schools found that taking civics courses of various types had little effect. This lack of strong parental and school effects contributed to the decline in popularity of the field.

### *Problems of the Traditional Socialization Model*

Where did the traditional socialization model go wrong? First, the developing child was believed to be a passive recipient nonreactive in the learning process. Compounding this problem was the fact that the earlier child development literature had led re-

searchers to concentrate too much on the stages of early childhood at the expense of later adolescence and early adulthood. The adolescent's search for personal identity in part may involve coping with social issues predominant at a particular historical period in a given society (5). The political potential of the person is by no means fixed in childhood; changes occur well into adulthood.

The stability biases of the early research failed to recognize both the diversity and conflict in our own society. Modern Western nations, and especially those of the emerging democracies, can be adequately portrayed not as unified wholes, but as arenas where many forces with differing interests are contending. Criteria of successful socialization used in the early research, particularly affiliation with a political party and trust in government, seem more problematic today.

More generally, the early focus on political outcomes came at the expense of ignoring the processes that are vital to democracy. The processes of deliberation (e.g., thoughtful processing of information, listening to diverse points of view, taking turns in discussions, working out compromises) are no less important than adoption of attitudes supportive of the political system.

### *Bringing Communication Into Socialization*

More than 30 years ago, Professor Steven Chaffee and I, along with our students, began work on the roles of media and interpersonal communication in the communication process. We used samples of 12- to 13-year-olds and 15- to 16-year-olds and randomly selected one of their parents. With respect to mass media and our criteria of political learning, we found significantly higher (though still modest) levels of news use and political knowledge and activity among the older adolescents. Of greater importance was our finding that news use, and particularly newspaper reading, was associated with political knowledge even after parental knowledge and demographics were controlled for.

We also discovered relatively high levels of citizenship mobility: Many middle-class, well-educated, and well-informed parents did not produce politically sophisticated adolescent citizens. At least some children in working-class families, with less well-educated parents, appeared to be heading for higher levels of political functioning than their parents. The failure of adolescents to adopt the political sophistication of their parents reflected the tendency of many

parents to see citizenship as natural, not needing teaching, or as the exclusive responsibility of schools.

Although the paucity of parental teaching of citizenship content limited its influence on children, the widely varying forms of normative communication patterns within the family had more marked influences on adolescent media use, political knowledge, and school activities (6,7). The presence of two independent dimensions of parent-child communication, measured by a set of questionnaire items administered separately to the child and parent, has been replicated many times by various researchers over the years. Concept orientation involves exposing the child to controversial issues and encouraging her or him to express ideas. Socio-orientation reflects parental stress on avoidance of interpersonal conflict and deference to authority. Adolescents from families high on concept orientation and low on socio-orientation are the most likely to be interested in public affairs media content and to have higher levels of civic knowledge. The study underscored the idea that the content focus of previous research should be shifted to concentrating on process or form.

### *Resurgence of Political Socialization Research*

After more than a decade of decline, political socialization research had a renaissance in the last half of the 1990s, as evidenced by dedicated issues in the *Journal of Social Issues* (8) and *Political Psychology* (9). The reasons for this resurgence of interest are many. The seeming decline in participatory civil society (1) and stagnant levels of political knowledge (10) despite rising educational attainment have aroused widespread concern. Further impetus was provided by Verba et al.'s (11) now classic work that found, from recollective reports of adult respondents, that taking a civics course and participating in high school government and clubs predicted adult civic skills and political participation.

The reputation of high school civics teaching was additionally refurbished by Niemi and Junn's (12) analysis of the 1988 National Assessment of Educational Progress data assessing the civic knowledge of high school seniors. Using a large set of items covering a wide range of political and civics topics, they showed that civics courses, particularly those involving students in expressive activities (rather than rote learning and ritual), enhanced civics knowledge.

Interest in the socialization of citizenship also has been stimulated by new approaches in developmen-

tal theory and research that emphasize changes across the life span and contextual influences of sociopolitical and economic conditions (8). Attention has been directed toward moral development, conceived of as personal commitment to actions benefiting others and the common good, as a fundamental aspect of identity consolidation that takes place through adolescence and early adulthood.

These new developmental approaches have provided the rationale for broadening the criteria for political socialization. Although recent cohorts of young adults have shown lower levels of voter turnout (2,13) and of other forms of traditional political participation (1), these trends may represent a shift in the form of civic participation rather than a fundamental loss in social capital (14). Volunteering for community activities among adolescents, for example, seems to be at record high levels. Experiences gained in such activities may provide the experiences and skills that make civic participation in later life more likely.

The socialization criteria have thus expanded beyond the earlier focus on formal governmental or partisan political functions to less formally political activities such as community volunteering and working on the school newspaper. Research attention may include the learning of values that may organize political beliefs. The concepts of personal efficacy and interpersonal trust have replaced the earlier conception of global trust in the political system as attitudes thought necessary to civic participation in later life.

Shifting the focus from formal political outcomes to the informal processes necessary for democratic deliberation directs attention to the development of such skills as critical and reflective strategies for processing information from the media; formulation and expression of opinions; understanding and tolerance for diverse points of view; listening and taking turns; principled reasoning; and bargaining and compromise in group decisions. Unfortunately, none of these processes is easy to teach or assess.

### *Bringing Communication Back In*

Despite changes in emphasis, recent political socialization research shares many of the characteristics of earlier research. It tends to use the individual adolescent student as the only unit of analysis, and most frequently measurement is confined to quantitative self-report questionnaire data from the adolescent, often in combination with test scores. Reliance on

individual student data thus limits the understanding of family and peer influences on adolescent socialization; in fact, these sources of interpersonal communication are not well explored even from the singular point of view of the adolescent respondent.

The lack of cross-discipline citation has led to the failure of the new political socialization research to bring mass media into the picture. If media are analyzed at all, the focus is usually on television rather than other media, and measurement is of time spent rather than exposure and attention to particular content. In the work of Niemi and Junn (12), for example, time spent with television was the sole media use measure employed. This gross measure of television viewing time did reveal a significant negative association with civic knowledge, although its contribution was weaker than most of the other 13 variables simultaneously introduced in the analysis.

Forty years of mass communication research has documented the importance of examining the use of other media along with television and the superiority of content-specific measures over measures of time spent. In terms of political learning among adolescents, newspaper and newsmagazine use has positive effects that are stronger than the negative effects of television time. Content makes a difference within television use. Watching news has beneficial effects, whereas watching entertainment (the largest component of television time) has a negative influence on civic knowledge. Content rather than the medium itself is the key to media influences on political behavior.

Modern developmental and mass communication research have both begun to conceptualize the learner in as active rather than passive. For studies of media use, it is useful to go beyond the extent of exposure to a type of content to measure the level of attention that the person pays to the content. Measuring attention is crucial in nonexperimental research to identifying effects for media such as television, where audience members are most often doing things other than focused viewing.

Research conducted with adults has identified sets of orientations affecting news media use and political behavior that also may be useful for the study of adolescents (15). Pre-exposure orientations, or what audience members bring to the exposure situation, may affect how the person uses media content and derives meaning from it. Some examples of such orientations that have been studied are world-view beliefs, materialism and postmaterialist values, perceptions of normative functions of news media; and gratifications sought from various types of content.

Postexposure orientations, or how the person deals with the content, include seeking additional information, information processing strategies, and discussion with others. Postexposure orientations mediate the effects of media use on political behavior.

The early history of communication research posed the news media and interpersonal communication as competing sources of political influence. They now are more likely to be seen as mutually facilitative in their political effects. Family communication research (6,7) asserts that normative patterns of family communication affect adolescent political learning both directly and indirectly through media use. The degree of heterogeneity of discussion networks strongly affects media use and the frequency of issue discussion (16) and each affects adult political participation. Without more attention to peer networks, we cannot say whether these findings apply to adolescents as well. Accounts of media roles in political socialization would be incomplete without full consideration of various interpersonal communication variables.

### *Interdependence of Socializing Agencies*

Political socialization research in both the earlier and modern versions has tended to study the effectiveness of socializing agencies, e.g., parents, schools, and the media, as independent sources of influence. As above, the interdependent effects of media, families, and discussion networks are well demonstrated in research with adults. Beyond research designs, applied projects attempting to improve civic participation would do well to consider the possibility of combining the influence of multiple agencies. Schools may use media effectively in teaching civics (17).

A further example of the effective triangulation of agencies was found in our research evaluating a quasi-experimental Kids Voting project in San Jose, California (18,19). The strategy behind these programs (which are being applied in dozens of communities across the country) is to combine the community resources of schools, families, and the media. Teachers in Grades 5–12 introduce parts of a basic core curriculum into their classes, usually some months before a state or national election. The major objective of the program is to increase voter turnout, in part by holding mock elections at local polling places where children may vote if they induce a parent or other adult to come to vote. Research by Simon and Merrill indicated that Kids Voting pro-

grams can generally increase turnout by several percentage points in areas where they operate (20). Local news media play a role by providing publicity and sometimes staging youth-oriented events, and by providing news content to be used in the classroom discussions.

Although Simon and Merrill (20) evaluated only the effectiveness of the program goal of increasing voter turnout, our own criteria were broader and included 13 measures of the political and communication behavior of the 10- to 17-year-olds participating and not participating in the local Kids Voting program. We found at least modest program effects on various measures: civics and candidate knowledge, self-efficacy and trust, and reduced cynicism. Stronger program effects on communication were found: more attentive newspaper reading, more attention to campaign news, and more frequent discussion of politics outside the classroom. Most important, students learned to process news more actively (by identifying biases in news) and reflectively (later thinking about information in the news). Communication behavior appeared to be an effective mediator of political outcomes, and it was the sole set of effects surviving in a follow-up study 6 months later (20).

The effectiveness of combining agency resources was also evidenced in analyses of the relative influence of the program in various subgroups where gaps often occur. Kids Voting tended to be at least as effective for lower as for higher socioeconomic status youth, and for minority as for nonminority youth. The program reversed the customary gender gap for two criteria: It was considerably more effective for girls than for boys in stimulating attention to campaign news and in conveying election knowledge.

### *What's to Be Done? Ideas for Future Research*

Both developmental and political socialization theory and research would benefit from paying closer attention to mass media and interpersonal communication. The reverse is also true: Communication theory and research would benefit from the study of adolescence and early adulthood. Many of the difficult issues of causal direction could be clarified, particularly by longer-term panel designs.

### **Evaluation of Civic Reform Programs**

Programs such as Kids Voting and Rock the Vote are designed to involve youth in the political process

and tend to be evaluated, if at all, in a limited way. Our evaluation of one Kids Voting program produced promising results but these programs differ in curriculum across cities and within classrooms. Analysis of variations across programs represent an opportunity to compare teaching content and strategies systematically. Similarly, the effects of public journalism efforts by news media to re-engage people in public life deserve evaluation, particularly among adolescents and young adults.

### **Civic Learning Gaps: Race, Gender, Status, and School Performance**

Most research on political socialization has paid insufficient attention to gaps that schooling and reform programs may create or widen. Enrichment may have greater benefits for the advantaged white, male, middle-class, college-track students than others. This concern did not materialize in Kids Voting (19,21), where gender gaps were reversed, and for civics curriculum effects generally (12), but these status interactions should be examined in all efforts to enhance civic life.

### **Reading Behavior and Civic Engagement**

Media research on learning civics and political knowledge has consistently found stronger positive effects for print than for electronic media. Development of reading habits can be considered a key aspect of political socialization. Unfortunately, the frequency of reading newspapers has declined markedly over the past 40 years. Nonreading has remained relatively stable, whereas the major shift has been from reading daily to "some days." Newspaper reading continues to grow from ages 20 to 50 years, but analyses indicate a somewhat delayed and smaller growth among recent cohorts. Research has not clarified the origins of newspaper reading beyond the family communication studies, and it is not clear whether its decline is part of an overall movement away from reading as an activity or a switch in interest to the softer news content found more readily in other media (22).

### **Adoption and Use of the Internet**

Computer literacy is much higher among younger persons. Some observers consider this positively, as a replacement of or supplement to information seeking from traditional media forms (23); others see it as

potentially harming civic participation and social relationships (24). In planning research, we should think of the Internet as a technological innovation that has many widely varying uses. For example, E-mail is inherently social, whereas other uses (e.g., video games) may be more solitary. Research should attempt to see how Internet uses fit into uses of traditional media in their effects on citizenship development. The Internet now contains a wealth of political information; however, much of it is dubious accuracy and it is questionable how much is being used by adolescents and young adults.

### **Media Use and Political Learning in the New Democracies**

Past political socialization findings have been shown to be conditioned by particular historical and social conditions. The patterns and variations of the particular social system also limit it. The recent emergence of democracies in Eastern Europe and elsewhere presents a unique opportunity to study a greater variation in media and political systems as youth seek to cope with their rapidly changing environment (25).

### **Peer Group Development and Influences**

Past research on adults identifies the heterogeneity of citizens' discussion networks as a key variable in political participation (16,26). Yet, the origins of network composition are not clear; in part they are constrained by social structure and in part are a matter of individual choice. Do adolescent peer group memberships reflect the patterns of communication found in the family? Are the networks formed by young adults a reflection of earlier peer group affiliations? What roles do peer groups play in the formation of citizenship patterns? Longer-term panel studies are needed to answer those questions.

### **Learning of Values and Media Use**

Values are thought to be a standard that people use to organize their political beliefs (26). Values also have been shown to be associated with media use, issue discussion, decision-making, and participation among adults (16,27,28). We know little about the origins of values and the causal ordering of their relationship with media use patterns. Panel studies through adolescence into early adulthood are crucial

to answering questions about the development and influence of values.

### **Influences of Media Use and Networks on Forms of Trust and Efficacy**

Trust in other people and a strong sense of self-efficacy have been found to be key links to political participation in adults. These attitudes are also associated with forms of media use and interpersonal communication; yet, the causal linkages are unclear. We know little about how these attitudes arise, although adolescents' participation in school activities and in volunteering may well bolster such attitudes.

### **High School Streaming Effects on Media Use and Participation**

Recent developmental research suggests that personal experiences during the life course have important consequences for adult personality and social life. The streaming of high school students into noncollege tracks and their subsequent encounter with the limited employment opportunities in early adulthood are severe real-world encounters that may substantially inhibit later civic participation. We know little about the noncollege segment of youth society, how they use or do not use media, what this does to trust in others, and how they regard politics and civil society.

### **Interactive Effects of Socializing Agencies**

Socialization to citizenship is influenced by a variety of potentially partly conflicting agencies: parents, peers, schools, and the media. Rather than treating these agencies separately, designs that allow for comparison and identification of interactive effects would greatly strengthen research in this area (21).

### **Media Effects on Political Reasoning and Deliberative Processes**

Part of the effort to understand the processes linking agencies of socialization with behavioral outcomes entails examining the thinking and discussion processes leading to political decisions. Through analysis of answers to open-ended survey questions and in-depth interviews, we can code such variables as frames, use of principled reasoning, and cognitive complexity, that integrate and direct political behav-

ior. These approaches have been used mostly with adults but they are equally applicable to adolescents.

### Conclusion

Although the knowledge base of citizenship development has been greatly increased by the revision in how we view adolescence, there is much to be learned that would be helpful to adolescent health practitioners as well as those concerned with the future of citizen participation in democracy. Research areas such as those listed above offer new avenues for exploration. Answers to the questions posed likely will make our understanding of political socialization more complex and simultaneously more clear. The emerging developmental models will replace the outdated transmission model and will be far more dynamic. The dynamic processes, if understood by those concerned about youth, have the potential to improve democracy and civic life for everyone.

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