Diverse Routes to Civic Participation Across Ages and Cultures: An Introduction

Parissa J. Ballard*
University of California, Berkeley and University of California, San Francisco

Maria K. Pavlova,* Rainer K. Silbereisen
University of Jena, Germany

William Damon
Stanford University, California

* These authors contributed equally to this article.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Research on Human Development, 12, 1-9, available online:

Author’s Note

Parissa J. Ballard is at the University of California, San Francisco and the University of California, Berkeley; Maria K. Pavlova is at the Center for Applied Developmental Science, Friedrich Schiller University of Jena, Germany. Rainer K. Silbereisen is also at the Center for Applied Developmental Science, Friedrich Schiller University of Jena, Germany, while William Damon is at the Graduate School of Education, Stanford University, California.

Address correspondence to Parissa J. Ballard, Center for Health and Community, 3333 California St San Francisco CA 94118. Email: Ballardpj@chc.ucsf.edu or to Maria K. Pavlova, Center for Applied Developmental Science, University of Jena, Semmelweisstr. 12, 07743 Jena, Germany. Email: maria.pavlova@uni-jena.de
Abstract

Civic participation is both a cornerstone of civil societies and a part of positive and productive individual development. Much is known about individual predictors of civic participation among ethnic majority Western adolescent and young adult samples. In this special issue, we aim to uncover the predictors of civic participation in less studied populations in order to better understand diverse routes to civic participation across ages and cultures. Framed by life-span and ecological perspectives, this special issue draws together studies that target different age groups, from adolescents to the old-old, as well as minority and immigrant populations and residents of diverse countries, including the US, Australia, Eastern and Western European countries, and Turkey.

Keywords: life-span perspective on civic participation, immigrant and minority civic participation, civic participation in older adults, predictors of civic participation
Diverse Routes to Civic Participation Across Ages and Cultures: An Introduction

Framed by life-span and ecological perspectives, this special issue aims to uncover the predictors of civic participation in understudied populations to better understand, and ultimately support, diverse routes to civic participation across ages and cultures. Civic participation is both a cornerstone of civil societies (Putnam, 1995) and a part of positive and productive individual development (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). Across the world, individuals and groups voluntarily give time and effort to civic activities such as working toward human rights, coping with disasters, fundraising for non-governmental groups, and combating social inequality. Even more modest examples of civic participation, such as directing a local youth group or organizing a street cleaning event, raise the quality of life in the community, contribute to social cohesion and trust, and can even improve health and well-being of volunteers themselves (Okun, Yeung, & Brown, 2013; Piliavin & Siegl, in press; Putnam, 1995; Richey, 2007). In the current special issue, civic participation is defined as activities that are directed at the community benefit or policy change and that are undertaken voluntarily and without substantial monetary compensation.

In separate literatures, civic contribution is seen as a crucial developmental task of adolescence and the transition to adulthood (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Lerner et al., 2003; Obradović & Masten, 2007; Youniss & Levine, 2009), as well as of middle and late adulthood (Bass & Caro, 2001; Erikson, 1963; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; World Health Organization, 2002). The opportunities, motivations, and forms of civic participation differ for younger and older adults (Morrow-Howell & Tang, 2007; Okun & Schultz, 2003; Omoto, Snyder, & Martino, 2000; Wilson, 2012). For example, in the US, numerous school-based civic opportunities are available specifically to adolescents. In terms of motivations for volunteerism, which we consider to be one form of civic participation, younger volunteers report instrumental (e.g., career-related) motivations more often than do older volunteers, although altruistic motivations prevail in all age groups (Okun & Schultz, 2003; cf. Omoto et
al., 2000). Younger individuals are more attracted by high-risk volunteering and political activism, whereas older individuals turn to community-oriented and church-related activities more often (Wilson, 2012). But even taking into account the above research on volunteer motivations, studies considering the predictors of civic participation across the life span are rare (Hirshorn & Settersten, 2013). As a step toward redressing this gap, the first purpose of this special issue is to draw together studies that target different age groups, from adolescents to the old-old.

Much is already known about individual characteristics and experiences that foster civic participation, for example, high socioeconomic status, early experience of civic participation, and embeddedness in social networks (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Wilson, 2012). Not surprisingly, extant knowledge on such predictors comes mostly from research in Western countries with long-standing traditions of civic participation, and within these countries, majority populations have usually been the focus of study. However, partly spurred by the activities of international NGOs, interest in and need for civic participation are growing in countries with less strong or different traditions of citizenship (World Volunteer Web, 2014; Yates & Youniss, 1999). Propelled by increased immigration in recent years, there has been a similar surge in interest regarding civic participation among youth from immigrant backgrounds, which is important for both the integration of immigrants into host societies and for the proper functioning of diverse democracies (Jensen, 2010). Thus the second purpose of this special issue is to present research on civic participation in minority populations and in countries other than the US and Western Europe.

**Applying Life-Span Theory to Civic Participation**

While preparing this special issue, we were guided by several of the meta-theoretical principles of life-span psychology (e.g., Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006). First, the principle of *developmental plasticity* means that human development is both open and constrained throughout the life course and that any given developmental trajectory or outcome
is but one of numerous possibilities. Similarly, the concept of **equifinality** means that any given developmental outcome may be reached through different pathways (Baltes et al., 2006). As applied to civic participation, the principle of developmental plasticity (Baltes et al., 2006) suggests that even older adults without prior experience of civic participation may find their way into it, despite the general norm that civic values and habits are predominantly formed in the first decades of life (Janoski, Musick, & Wilson, 1998). For this reason, in selecting articles for this special issue, we asked several authors (Chen & Morrow-Howell; Kruse & Schmitt; Pavlova et al.) to pay attention to the *initiation* of civic participation in older adults. Similarly, the principle of equifinality (Baltes et al., 2006) suggests an attractive possibility that individuals who appear to be discouraged from civic participation because they are afforded few civic opportunities (e.g., immigrants and individuals in countries lacking civic traditions) may nevertheless get civically involved through pathways which have yet to be thoroughly investigated. Accordingly, several manuscripts in this special issue (Ballard et al.; Eckstein et al.; Kim et al.; Pavlova et al.; Suárez-Orozco et al.; Wray-Lake et al.) deal with minority populations (i.e., immigrants) or with residents of countries that do not have strong traditions of civic participation (e.g., post-communist or Muslim societies).

The principle of **ontogenetic and historical contextualism** refers to individual embeddedness in their developmental contexts, ranging from the micro-contexts of family, peer groups, school or workplace, and community organizations, to the macro-contexts of society and culture, all of which evolve over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Two implications of this principle are especially relevant. First, individuals are not passive recipients of contextual influences but active agents who develop through acting upon and changing their environments (Silbereisen, Eyferth, & Rudinger, 1986). In particular, the concept of adaptive developmental regulation describes the processes whereby individuals change their environments in positive ways that, in turn, benefit the individuals (Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2011). Civic participation is a good example of
adaptive developmental regulation, because the chief purpose of civic participation in a democratic society is achieving positive change in the community and society at large, which, ideally, fosters further participation and thriving of individuals (Lerner et al., 2003). Thus, by virtue of its very topic, this special issue addresses individual agency in development.

Second, the contextual embeddedness of individual development implies its substantial variability across different contexts, because each context (or a set of contexts constituting the individual’s developmental ecology; see Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) is associated with unique opportunities for and constraints on development (Baltes et al., 2006). Thus opportunities for, pathways to, and the very content of civic participation vary across social and cultural groups, societies, and historical time (Salamon & Anheier, 1998; Youniss & Levine, 2009).

Contextual variation in the content of civic participation is well known from cross-national research on the third sector. For example, in countries such as the US and the UK, state welfare spending is relatively low and nonprofit sectors are large, whereas in social democracies, such as the Scandinavian countries, state welfare spending is high, leaving little room for nonprofit activities in the social welfare domain (Salamon & Anheier, 1998; Salamon & Sokolowski, 2001). Civic participation in these countries differs markedly in both form and function (Salamon & Anheier, 1998; Salamon & Sokolowski, 2001). For this special issue, we solicited articles drawing on populations from different countries, and two studies explicitly compare the predictors of civic participation across societies (Eckstein et al. and Kim et al.).

All forms of human development are embedded in particular historical contexts (Baltes et al., 2006; Elder, 1998). This knowledge is especially relevant when one considers civic participation. The opportunities and motivations for civic participation depend on political structures and historical events. As an example, racial inequities and tensions in the late 1950s and 1960s in the US catalyzed the civil rights movement, which became a major
source of civic participation for many US citizens at the time. Another well-known example is the resistance movements of pro-democratic citizens of East European countries under the communist regimes. In this special issue, the study by Kim et al. touches upon the role of historical time, as this study compares adolescent samples from Western and East European countries surveyed several years after the breakdown of communism.

In the following section, we explain in more detail how the present selection of articles contributes to a better understanding of pathways to civic participation across ages and cultures. We first describe the age composition of the samples and highlight findings that indicate life-span variation or continuity in the predictors of civic participation. Next, we focus on the contextual and cultural diversity of the samples investigated in this special issue. In particular, we discuss immigrant populations, cross-country variation, and the role of historical time. Throughout this overview, we note how the findings illustrate the above key principles of life-span psychology. In conclusion of this introductory article, we make some suggestions for future research.

**Civic Participation Across Ages**

In this special issue, articles are ordered by age of the samples that they use. Wray-Lake et al., Kim et al., and Ballard et al. address civic participation in adolescents; Eckstein et al. and Suárez-Orozco et al. consider late adolescents and young adults; Pavlova et al. compare four age groups, from emerging adults to young-old adults; Chen and Morrow-Howell investigate older adults, predominantly the young-old; and finally, Kruse and Schmitt focus on old-old adults.

Three papers examine civic motivations in three different age groups. Using an empirically driven approach to classify developmentally salient motivations among adolescents, Ballard et al. found four motivational classes for political and non-political volunteering: helping identity, instrumental, personal issues, and weak motivations. In a qualitative study, Chen and Morrow-Howell found four categories of motivations among
African-American and White adults between the ages of 50 and 93: altruism, self-oriented, both altruism and self-oriented, and practical features of volunteer program. In Ballard et al.’s and Chen and Morrow-Howell’s studies, the smallest proportions of respondents reported mostly extrinsic motivations for volunteerism (“instrumental reasons” in Ballard et al. and “self-oriented” in Chen & Morrow-Howell). In both studies, large groups of participants reported a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (cf. Clary & Snyder, 1999). Finally, using a qualitative approach, Suárez-Orozco et al. found that Latino young adults from immigrant backgrounds were motivated by social responsibility, awareness of social injustice, and a desire to create social change. Importantly, many reported more than one motivation.

Interpreted in light of life-span theories (Hirshorn & Settersten, 2013), these findings provide some evidence for age-specific priorities motivating volunteerism—for example, identity motives might be particularly salient for adolescents. In addition, there is evidence of motivational similarities across ages—for example, an internal sense of responsibility to help others. The latter type of motivation, however, may take age-specific forms too; for instance, concern for the next generation is more typical for older adults than for younger individuals (Erickson, 1963; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Furthermore, Chen and Morrow-Howell’s findings aptly illustrate the principle of equifinality in development: Despite the variations in initial motivations for volunteering, outcomes such as longevity of service and satisfaction with it were not affected by the type of motivation. More generally, the multiplicity of motivations for civic participation shown by the present studies (cf. Clary & Snyder, 1999) is an excellent example of the diversity of pathways to civic participation.

One study that took a life-span approach directly is that by Pavlova et al., who compared contextual predictors of civic participation across a wide age range, albeit cross-sectionally. A major lesson learned from their findings is that some predictors of civic participation appear to hold across age groups, whereas the effects of others may be specific to particular life periods. The most consistent predictor was organizational collective efficacy,
measuring one’s belief that local voluntary organizations can achieve community improvement. This result suggests that efficacy beliefs are key to individuals’ readiness to engage in challenging activities such as civic participation, irrespective of age (cf. Bandura, 1997, 2000). In contrast, perceived support from friends was relevant to civic participation only at a younger age, when friends play a greater role in one’s life than at later life periods.

In the final contribution to this special issue, Kruse and Schmitt present unique data on the civic concerns and participation of German old-old adults as well as on beliefs held about this age group by employees of municipalities and voluntary organizations. It turns out that the latter may seriously underestimate the needs of old-old adults to participate in and to contribute to social and community life. This lack of appreciation results in lacking support structures, which may be one of the reasons why the meaning and content of civic participation at an advanced old age appear to shift towards psychological, rather than behavioral, engagement, such as preoccupation with the lives and welfare of younger generations (Kruse & Schmitt, this issue; cf. Erikson, 1963; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). The fact that some of the old-old participants of Kruse and Schmitt’s study did report being civically engaged, some of them for the first time in their lives, provides striking evidence in favor of developmental plasticity at an older age (Baltes et al., 2006).

Civic Participation Across Contexts and Cultures

Immigrant Populations

Across many societies, immigrants face more barriers to incorporation in civic life compared to non-immigrant groups (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). However, many immigrants overcome such barriers and become engaged in civic life (Jensen, 2010). Four articles in this special issue examine diverse routes to civic participation among immigrant youth and young adults. Ballard et al. and Eckstein et al. compared immigrant and non-immigrant samples in the US and Europe, respectively, whereas Suárez-Orozco et al. and Wray-Lake et al. examined predictors of civic participation within immigrant samples in the US.
Using samples from Belgium, Germany, and Turkey, Eckstein et al. found that internal political efficacy beliefs predicted civic participation among non-immigrant youth, whereas involvement in youth organizations and neighborhood activities had stronger effects on civic participation among immigrant youth. Eckstein et al. argued that immigrants are typically less embedded in the host society than are non-immigrants; hence, social networks may be all the more important in promoting civic participation in immigrant youth.

Examining differences across ethnic immigrant groups in the US, Wray-Lake et al. found that ecological assets, such as community connection and social network resources, predicted civic commitment among Latino and Asian youth. However, the belief that US is a fair society predicted greater civic commitment among Asian but not Latino immigrant youth. This finding should be interpreted in light of the fact that Asian youth belong to a more accepted ethnic minority group in the US, whereas Latino youth often feel marginalized and rejected (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002).

Although Ballard et al. found mostly similarities in what motivated Asian and Latino groups to volunteer for political and non-political causes, second-generation immigrant youth were more motivated by instrumental reasons compared to non-immigrants. Civic participation provides a valuable set of opportunities to build skills and prepare for the future, especially given that youth from immigrant backgrounds often have less well-established social networks and access to fewer job opportunities.

Suárez-Orozco et al. found Latino immigrant late adolescents to be motivated for civic engagement by beliefs in social responsibility and experiences with or awareness of injustice. In line with prior research (Jensen, 2010), the authors also found that many were motivated by immigrant-specific concerns such as immigration reform. This finding aligns with the qualitative evidence from Ballard et al. that Mexican youth in particular felt called to civic action by the immigration reform. Altogether, these studies suggest that individual and
contextual predictors of participation differ for immigrants compared with non-immigrants across countries and between ethnic subgroups in the US.

**Cross-Country Variation and Historical Time**

Of special interest in this special issue are studies that presented data from regions without strong traditions of civic participation. Two studies provided evidence from post-communist countries: Kim et al. used data from the 1990s to compare the predictors of adolescent civic commitments in stable (i.e., Australia and the US) and fledgling (i.e., Bulgaria and Hungary) democracies, whereas Pavlova et al. used data collected in 2013 in the former East Germany. Both studies reported sizable rates of civic participation in post-communist countries. Kim et al. found that, in the first years of the post-communist transition, which was a time of enthusiasm and excitement, adolescents from the respective countries showed even more interest in civic participation (except for conventional politics) than did their peers from stable democracies. As expected, adolescents from fledgling democracies reported lower levels of school participation, family social responsibility, and community social capital than did adolescents from stable democracies. Furthermore, the pattern of predictors of civic commitments differed somewhat between the two types of polities. For example, democratic school climate predicted commitment to local community and nation in stable democracies but predicted commitment to conventional politics in fledgling democracies.

In the former East Germany, Pavlova et al. found consistently negative effects of perceived family support on future intentions for civic participation across adulthood. Pavlova et al. offered two alternative explanations for this surprising finding. One of them is that individuals with low family support get involved in civic endeavors to find new sources of social support (Omoto & Snyder, 1995). Another explanation is sociohistorical: In communist countries, private networks of relatives and friends served to support their members only (Howard, 2003), and it may be that even nowadays, a supportive, closely knit family is not
conducive to civic participation in these countries. In fact, Kim et al.’s finding that family social responsibility was lower in fledgling than in stable democracies aligns with this idea.

The third study that drew on data from non-Western contexts was conducted by Eckstein et al. They compared the rates and predictors of civic participation among native and immigrant youth from Belgium, Germany, and Turkey. Despite substantial cultural differences between the two West European countries and Turkey, many similarities emerged. Across countries, involvement in youth organizations and internal political efficacy beliefs were correlated with civic participation among majority youth. However, mobilization by others (e.g., being asked to get civically engaged), which is a classical predictor of civic participation (Verba et al., 1995), turned out to have significant effects in Belgium and Germany but not in Turkey. Moreover, in ethnic Turkish immigrants from Bulgaria to Turkey, mobilization had a negative effect on youth civic engagement. The authors’ intriguing interpretation of these findings was that in Turkey, it may be primarily authority figures belonging to the Turkish majority culture that call upon youth to become civically engaged. In this case, minority youth may oppose such “mobilization” attempts, and even majority youth may not be especially responsive to them. This is a telling example of how different cultural and societal contexts may differently shape civic participation.

**Conclusions and Future Directions**

Studies in this special issue draw attention to the similarities and variation in the predictors of civic participation across life stages, countries, immigrant and non-immigrant populations, and ethnic groups. By so doing, these studies contribute to a better contextualization of civic participation, which is rooted in tasks and concerns of a particular life stage and is contingent on historical, socioeconomic, and cultural constraints and affordances. Perhaps most importantly, the studies presented here illustrate that routes to civic participation may be found even in populations and contexts that are usually regarded as not conducive to civic endeavors. Striking examples are old-old individuals who became civically
engaged at this advanced age for the first time in their lives (Kruse & Schmitt) and undocumented immigrant youth who stood up for immigrants’ rights, although this could jeopardize their residence in the US (Suárez-Orozco et al.).

We wish to highlight several potential future directions. First, we urge future researchers to apply ecological and life-span perspectives to civic development. Empirical work has now documented rates, types, and predictors of civic activities of young people and adults; now it will be fruitful to turn to the contextually embedded and dynamic developmental processes by which individuals come to participate in civic life. Second, we must acknowledge that civic participation is a lifelong process, although its relevance likely waxes and wanes across the life course. Accordingly, researchers should direct their attention to both younger and older segments of the life span. As Hirshorn and Settersten (2013) proposed, research could examine life-course trajectories of civic participation within individuals rather than comparing age groups, as the latter approach misses individual variability. Third, future work should expand on the findings presented here on the predictors of civic participation in diverse populations and examine the range of effects such civic participation has for diverse individuals and communities. Given that routes to civic participation vary for groups such as older adults, immigrants, and residents of regions without long-standing traditions of civic participation, it is important to explore how civic participation might differentially benefit individuals from such different groups. As one example, civic participation might play a unique role in psychosocial development among immigrants by providing an empowered way of connecting with civic systems in the host societies.
References


