

Adolescent Civic and Political Engagement: Associations Between Domain-Specific Judgments and Behavior

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Judgments and justifications for different forms of civic involvement and their associations with organized and civic behavior were examined in 312 middle-class primarily White adolescents ($M = 17.01$ years). Adolescents applied moral, conventional, and personal criteria to distinguish involvement in community service, standard political, social movement, and social gathering activities. Males judged standard political involvement to be more obligatory and important than did females, who judged community service to be more obligatory and important than did males. For each form of civic involvement, greater involvement was associated with more positive judgments and fewer personal justifications. Structural equation modeling indicated that adolescents' judgments about specific types of civic involvement were associated with similar forms of civic behaviors.

Political scientists have a long-standing interest in the origins of citizenship and have primarily examined prerequisites of civic participation including knowledge about government structure and political process (Furnham & Stacey, 1991; Stradling, 1977). Recent civic development research has broadened this focus and explored how adolescent community and political action affect citizenship development (Flanagan, 2005). However, questions remain as to what being a "good citizen" entails, as political theorists have argued that definitions of citizenship are embedded in specific political ideologies (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Political scientists have stressed the importance of active political engagement such as voting (Walker, 2000), but developmental psychologists have extended the definition of civic activity to include both "conventional" and "social-cause" political activities, as well as membership in community organizations, volunteering, and community service (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001; Youniss et al., 2002). Research has not examined adolescents' attitudes toward different types of civic

involvement, however. Therefore, it is unclear whether adolescents actually view civic behavior as an obligatory part of citizenship or as a matter of personal choice. Research also has not examined whether distinctions among types of civic activity are meaningful to adolescents.

The present study utilized social domain theory (Smetana, 2006) to investigate adolescents' judgments and justifications about different types of civic activity and their associations with adolescents' civic and organized activities. According to social domain theory, from early ages on, individuals develop different types of social knowledge, including moral, conventional, and personal knowledge, and much research has examined the criteria that individuals use to differentiate acts in these domains (for a review, see Smetana, 2006). *Morality* is defined as prescriptive judgments regarding human welfare, justice, and rights and is seen as obligatory, universally applicable, and not contingent on regulatory authority. *Morality* has been distinguished from *conventional* concepts, which are defined as alterable, agreed-upon regulations that coordinate behaviors and interactions within specific social contexts. Individuals have also been found to view some acts as *personal*, or as outside moral obligation or conventional concern, because they involve personal prerogatives and choice (Nucci, 1996). Previous studies have found that adolescents' judgments concerning political concepts

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such as human rights (Helwig, 1997) and forms of government (Helwig, 1998) are multifaceted and entail moral, conventional, and personal reasoning. Likewise, adolescents' conceptions of civic engagement also may draw on different moral or social concepts.

As morality is seen as obligatory, we examined adolescents' ratings of their obligation to be involved in different types of civic activities, including community service, standard political involvement (e.g., voting), social gathering involvement (e.g., participating in community clubs), and social movement involvement (e.g., protesting for a cause). Consistent with previous research, and an important criterion for differentiating domains, we also examined adolescents' justifications for their judgments.

Although not considered formal criteria for differentiating social domains, we also included assessments of importance and respect. Community service and politically oriented activities can be seen as prosocial behaviors directed toward specific individuals, communities, or civic institutions. Previous research examining domain distinctions in children's and adolescents' prosocial reasoning has shown that prosocial moral issues are seen as highly important, prosocial conventional issues are ranked moderate in importance, and prosocial personal issues are ranked as least important (Smetana, Bridgeman, & Turiel, 1982). Drawing on Williams (1985), who argued that prosocial actions are thought to be moral if they are "greatly admired" or "well thought of," Kahn (1992) found that children rated moral prosocial acts as more praiseworthy than other types of prosocial acts.

Because community service activities may directly affect the welfare of others, it was hypothesized that adolescents would view this form of involvement as moral (i.e., highly obligatory, socially praiseworthy, and most important based on moral justifications). Though discretionary, standard political activities involve commonly assumed basic American citizenship expectations (Walker, 2002). This led us to hypothesize that these activities would be conceptualized as social conventions (i.e., less obligatory, praiseworthy, and important than community service, based on conventional justifications). Exploratory analyses investigated adolescents' domain-specific conceptualizations of involvement in social gathering and social movement activities.

Previous research on various topics, including adolescents' drug use (Nucci, Guerra, & Lee, 1991), has shown that domain differences in individuals' interpretations of complex social behaviors are sys-

tematically associated with their behavior. Civic development theorists have hypothesized that adolescent involvement may be associated with an increased commitment to adult civic behavior (Flanagan & Faison, 2002). Individuals who are engaged in civic and community activities may be less likely to view civic involvement as a personal choice but, instead, may view engagement as obligatory for either conventional or moral reasons. In the present study, we examined associations between adolescents' participation in civic and organized activities and their judgments and justifications concerning different types of civic involvement. It was hypothesized that, compared to less involved youth, more involved adolescents would justify all forms of civic involvement using more moral and conventional reasons and would view civic involvement as more obligatory and more worthy of respect. Given adolescents' unique experiences in different types of organized activities (Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006), we also explored associations between adolescents' engagement in separate activities and their civic judgments. It was hypothesized that adolescents' civic judgments would be more strongly associated with their engagement in parallel types of organized and civic activities than in other types of activities. In these analyses and based on previous research (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998; Jacobs, Vernon, & Eccles, 2005), we also examined the effects of sex and social class.

Method

Participants

Participants were 312 students in Grades 10–12 (age range = 15–19 years, $M = 16.88$, $SD = 0.92$) at a high school in upstate New York. The sample included relatively equal numbers of boys (45%, $n = 139$) and girls ($n = 173$) and was primarily White (74%, $n = 230$); the remainder was African American (11%, $n = 33$), Asian/Pacific Islander (6%, $n = 20$), Hispanic/Latino (2%, $n = 5$), Native American (1%, $n = 2$), and other, including biracial (7%, $n = 22$). Most of the participants' mothers and fathers had completed college (43% and 44%, respectively) or had graduate degrees (12% each).

Measures

Civic involvement stimuli. Beliefs and judgments about civic involvement were assessed using 21 items, including five *standard citizenship political activities* (e.g., vote in a political election, keep up

with current events and politics) and seven *social movement political* activities (e.g., protest against a law, boycott a company's product or service) chosen and adapted from established measures of citizenship and civic engagement (Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Youniss, Yates, & Su, 1997). The items also included five *community service* activities (e.g., help feed the homeless, work at a fundraiser aiding victims of a natural disaster) and four *community gathering* activities (e.g., join a community sports or music club, join a neighborhood social club), which were created specifically for this study.

Assessments

Should and obligation. Similar to Kahn (1992), participants rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*doesn't matter*) to 5 (*definitely should*) whether individuals "should" engage in each of the 21 civic items (referred to as the "should" scale). Alpha coefficients for the four civic involvement categories ranged from 0.76 to 0.84. For each of the 21 items, participants also rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all wrong*) to 5 (*very wrong*) "How wrong is it if someone does NOT do the activity" (referred to as the "wrong" scale). Alphas ranged from 0.81 to 0.91. On both scales, higher ratings indicated that the activity was more obligatory.

Justifications. As has been done previously (Nucci et al., 1991), adolescents' justifications were assessed by questionnaire. For each civic involvement item, participants were asked "Why should people . . .?" Based on piloting with undergraduates and a small group of high school students, participants were instructed to choose the *most* important reason from a list of five response categories: "practical benefits: school, job, career experience, gain other's respect" (pragmatic), "person's own choice or desire, up to the person, personal fulfillment" (personal), "important to follow customs and do what is expected of you" (conventional), "important for things to run smoothly, people need to do their part" (conventional), and "helps or benefits other people" (moral). The two conventional categories were collapsed into one category for analysis. We created proportion scores assessing how much each justification was used for each civic involvement category.

Importance rankings. Participants indicated the importance of each activity by selecting the seven items each they considered *most important* (scored as 3), *sort of important* (scored as 2), and *least important* (scored as 1). This "forced ranking" task was

designed to capture potential differentiations in adolescents' judgments. Average rankings were computed for each of the four civic involvement categories.

Respect ratings. Drawing from Kahn (1992) and Williams (1985), we assessed the praiseworthiness of the civic activities. Piloting indicated that for high school students, the concept of admiration or praise was best captured with the notion of "respect." Participants rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*none at all*) to 5 (*a lot*) "How much would you respect someone who engages in each of the following activities?" Alphas ranged from 0.82 to 0.88.

Adolescent Civic and Organized Activities

Adolescents' current activities were measured using a 23-item Likert scale adapted from previous research (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Smetana & Metzger, 2005; Youniss et al., 1997). The items represented current involvement in five categories, including three religious activities, four volunteering activities, four community group activities, six school or community political activities, and four school involvement/extracurricular activities. Adolescents rated their level of involvement over an average month from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*).

Procedures

Tenth- through 12th-grade students from the high school were recruited in students' classrooms (12th graders) and study halls (10th and 11th graders), and questionnaires were administered in those contexts for students who both assented and obtained parental consent. Participating students were eligible for one of three randomly drawn \$50 gift certificates to a local shopping mall.

Results

Adolescents' Judgments and Justifications About Civic Involvement

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for adolescents' judgments and justifications (in proportions) for each of the four civic involvement categories. Pearson correlations among the judgments and justifications were generally moderate in magnitude both within civic involvement categories ($r_s = .43-.62$) and across these categories ($r_s = .03-.55$).

Table 1

Means, (Standard Deviations), and F Values for Adolescents' Judgments and Justifications for Civic Involvement Categories

| | Community service | Standard political | Social movement | Community gathering | Main effects (df = 3, 309) | η^2 |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|----------|
| Should | 3.51 ^a (0.87) | 3.74 ^b (0.84) | 2.73 ^c (0.79) | 2.85 ^d (1.00) | 168.69*** | .35 |
| Obligation | 2.41 ^a (1.03) | 2.95 ^b (1.10) | 1.84 ^c (0.71) | 1.56 ^d (0.81) | 289.69*** | .48 |
| Importance | 1.45 ^a (0.48) | 1.30 ^b (0.44) | 0.76 ^c (0.29) | 0.46 ^d (0.47) | 287.85*** | .48 |
| Respect | 4.20 ^a (0.77) | 3.44 ^b (0.89) | 3.15 ^c (0.77) | 2.70 ^d (0.90) | 292.85*** | .49 |
| Moral justifications | 0.75 ^a (0.32) | 0.05 ^b (0.13) | 0.16 ^b (0.19) | 0.05 ^b (0.13) | 823.48*** | .73 |
| Conventional justifications | 0.09 ^a (0.18) | 0.60 ^b (0.32) | 0.23 ^c (0.20) | 0.09 ^a (0.19) | 371.74*** | .55 |
| Personal justifications | 0.12 ^a (0.23) | 0.29 ^b (0.30) | 0.52 ^c (0.27) | 0.74 ^d (0.33) | 342.26*** | .53 |

Note. Judgments were rated on a 5-point scale. Means with different superscripts differ at Bonferroni-adjusted p values. *** $p < .001$.

To test whether adolescents distinguished among categories of civic involvement, separate 2 (gender) \times 4 (civic involvement category) mixed-model analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed on adolescents' judgments of should, obligation, importance, and respect. Significant main effects for civic involvement category for all four judgments (see Table 1 for F values) followed by post hoc analyses with Bonferroni corrections revealed that adolescents judged that individuals should be more involved and viewed it as more wrong not to be involved in standard political activities than community service. They judged that individuals should be more involved in community service than in both social movement and community gathering behaviors, whereas they judged it to be more wrong not to be involved in community service than in social movement political actions. This, in turn, was seen as more wrong than not engaging in community gatherings. Adolescents' importance rankings followed a slightly different pattern. Youth ranked community service as most important, followed by standard political involvement, then social movement involvement, and finally, community gathering involvement. Similar to the importance rankings, adolescents rated community service as most worthy of respect, followed by standard political involvement, then social movement involvement, and, finally, community gathering involvement.

These main effects were qualified by significant Gender \times Civic Involvement Category interactions for should judgments, $F(3, 308) = 6.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .02$; wrong judgments, $F(3, 308) = 6.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .02$; and importance rankings, $F(3, 308) = 5.02$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$. For each of these, girls prioritized community service more than did boys, and boys prioritized standard political involvement more than did girls.

Next, separate 2 (gender) \times 4 (civic involvement category) ANOVAs were run on the proportionate responses for each justification category (see Table 1 for main effects). Because adolescents rarely used pragmatic justifications (7% overall), analyses were run only on the proportion scores for moral, conventional, and personal justifications.

As shown in Table 1, moral justifications were used more for community service than for any other form of involvement and more for involvement in social movement activities than for involvement in both standard political and community gathering activities. Conventional justifications were used more for standard political involvement than for social movement involvement and more for social movement than for both community service and community gathering involvement. Personal justifications were used the most for community gathering involvement, followed by social movement, standard political, and community service involvement, respectively (all $ps < .001$).

Civic Behavior and Civic Conceptualizations (Judgments and Justifications)

Civic behavior and civic judgments. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the different categories of adolescent activity involvement are reported in Table 2. The activity measures were significantly though moderately correlated, so, as planned, our models examined both overall involvement and level of involvement in different activities separately.

Using Amos 7 with maximum likelihood estimation and testing measurement and structural models simultaneously, we first tested a structural equation model examining the relationship between adolescents' civic judgments and their overall activity involvement, depicted in Figure 1. The five

Table 2
Means, (Standard Deviations), and Zero-Order Correlations Among Adolescent Activities

| | M (SD) | Religious | Volunteer/service | Community | Political | School |
|-------------------|-------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|--------|
| Religious | 2.24 (1.23) | 1.00 | .42 | .29 | .16 | .22 |
| Volunteer/service | 2.56 (0.92) | | 1.00 | .55 | .44 | .51 |
| Community | 2.11 (0.84) | | | 1.00 | .46 | .59 |
| Political | 2.06 (0.65) | | | | 1.00 | .45 |
| School | 2.67 (1.03) | | | | | 1.00 |

Note. Activity was scored on a 5-point scale where higher scores indicate more involvement. All correlations were significant at $p < .001$.

organized activity scales were specified as indicators of an overall organized activity latent variable. Latent variables for community service judgments, standard political judgments, and social movement judgments were created that included the respective "should," "wrong," and "respect" scales as indicators. In addition, adolescents' gender and parents' educational level were included as demographic controls.

To improve the fit of the model, nonsignificant parameters and variables were removed, including parents' education. In addition, the error terms for similar types of judgments (should, wrong, and respect) were permitted to covary to account for unique method variance associated with each type of judgment, and the residual error terms for the three civic judgment latent variables also were allowed to covary. The resulting model had marginal fit, $\chi^2/df = 3.89$, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.90, root mean square error of approxima-

tion (RMSEA) = 0.095, and indicated that adolescents' overall activity involvement was positively associated with their civic judgments for all three forms of civic involvement: $\beta_s = .50, .39, .46$, $ps < .001$, for community service, standard political, and social movement judgments, respectively. In addition, girls judged community service to be more obligatory and worthy of respect than did boys, $\beta = .25, p < .001$.

A similar model was fit in which all five categories of organized activity involvement were specified as unique predictors of the three civic judgment latent variables. Nonsignificant parameters were removed, including the community and school activity variables. The final model had a good fit to the data, $\chi^2/df = 2.14$, CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.060, and indicated that, as shown in Figure 2, adolescents' volunteer/service activity was positively associated with community service judgments, and political activity was positively

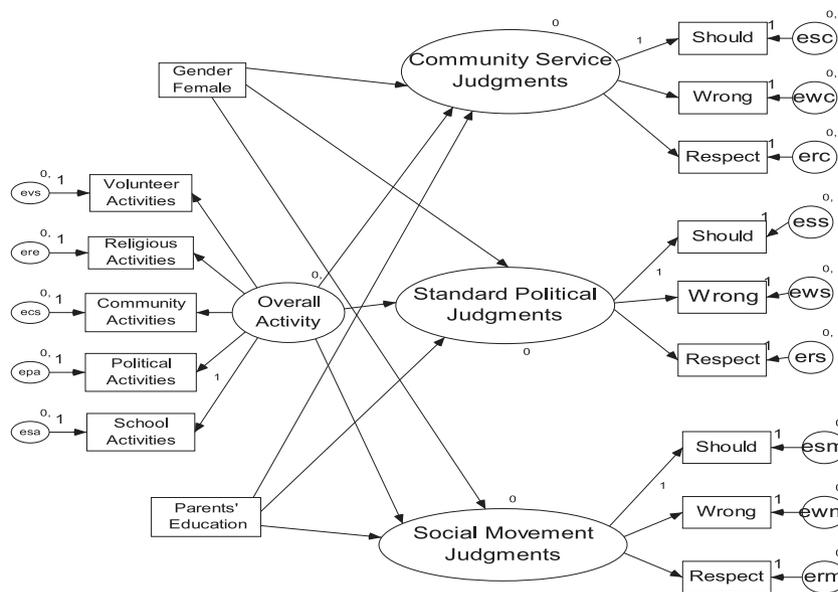


Figure 1. Proposed model: Adolescents' overall activities as a predictor of civic beliefs.

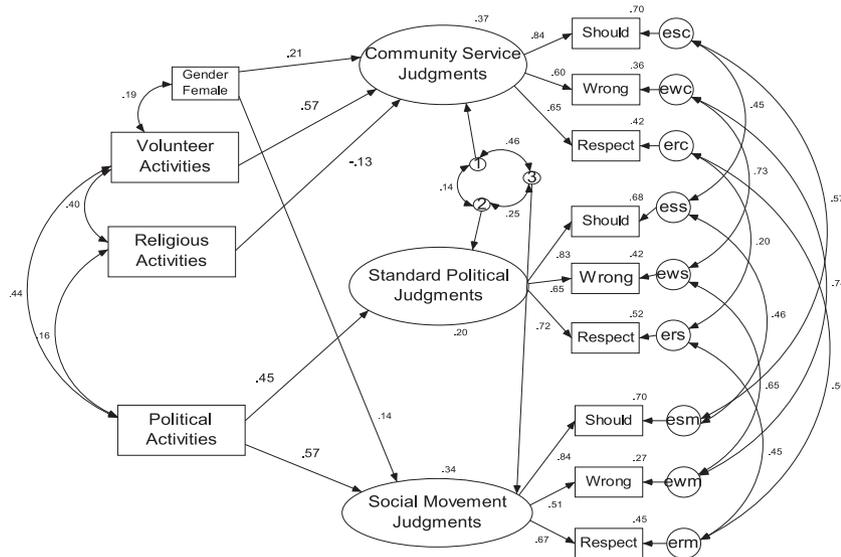


Figure 2. Separate activities as predictors of adolescent civic beliefs (trimmed model).
 Note. $\chi^2/df = 2.14$, comparative fit index = 0.97, root mean square error of approximation = 0.060. All parameters, $p < .01$.

associated with both standard political and social movement judgments. Surprisingly, adolescents' religious activity was negatively associated with their judgments concerning community service. Again, females judged community service—but also social movement involvement—to be more obligatory and worthy of respect than did males.

Civic behavior and civic justifications. Because adolescents' justifications could not be combined into latent constructs, each justification was analyzed separately in relation to adolescents' overall activity involvement. Partial correlations between adolescents' overall involvement and their justifications, controlling for adolescents' sex and parents' education, indicated that involved adolescents gave fewer personal justifications for community service, $r(301) = -.13, p < .05$; standard political involvement, $r(301) = -.14, p < .05$; and social movement involvement, $r(301) = -.14, p < .05$.

Discussion

The findings of the present study indicated that middle-class, primarily White high school students' conceptualizations of different types of civic involvement varied and that they systematically treated different types of activities as moral, conventional, or personal as defined within social domain theory (Smetana, 2006). Distinctions were present in judgments of obligation and justifications, which are both formal criteria for distinguishing the domains (for a review, see Smetana, 2006)

as well as in importance rankings and ratings of social praise. Although these latter two assessments have been used primarily in studies examining domain differences in prosocial reasoning (Kahn, 1992; Smetana et al., 1982), the similarity in findings across the multiple assessments used here provides strong support for our conclusions. In addition, adolescents' engagement in civic and organized activities was systematically related to their reasoning about different types of civic involvement.

Adolescents' judgments and justifications indicated that they treated community gathering activities as personal prerogatives. Although these activities do not constitute civic involvement per se, sociological studies have examined social gathering activities as proxies for or antecedents of social capital and political involvement. In his widely publicized work on "bowling alone," Putnam (2000) found associations between declines in community gatherings and other forms of political and civic involvement. However, our findings indicated that community gathering activities may be viewed as outside of individuals' civic responsibilities. Consequently, participation rates in these community activities may not be associated with individuals' broader civic judgments.

In contrast, community service involvement was treated as a moral issue in adolescents' judgments and justifications. Interestingly, and contrary to hypotheses, standard political activities were rated as more obligatory than community service, although standard political activities were treated

as conventional in terms of justifications, respect ratings, and importance rankings (the latter two of which were moderate). Thus, standard political involvement was rated as more obligatory than involvement in community service, but for conventional reasons. This is consistent with previous studies that have found that even when individuals distinguish among behaviors in different domains based on criteria such as rule contingency and justifications, they may rate conventional activities as more serious than moral actions (Tisak & Turiel, 1988). Adolescents may have learned from both schools and the popular media that political activities such as voting are central to the continuation of a representative democracy and therefore view these activities as essential aspects of citizens' shared responsibilities.

The finding that girls prioritized community service more than boys is consistent with previous findings that girls score higher on measures of prosocial reasoning than boys (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006); this could lead them to prioritize helping others through community service. As boys prioritized standard political involvement more than girls, an alternative explanation is that compared to boys, girls gave less priority to standard political involvement. Walker (2000, 2002) has pointed out that historically, patterns of civic learning that highlighted service or volunteering and not political answers to social problems were often stressed for adolescent girls as alternatives to active political engagement.

Finally, involvement in social movement activities was seen as markedly less obligatory, less worthy of respect, and less important than involvement in standard political activities or community service. Adolescents in the present sample may have prioritized more mainstream forms of political participation over engagement aimed at changing governmental and social policies. This could represent a cohort effect, as previous generations of college students (most notably during the 1960s) took part in social protests in large numbers. However, most of those involved in social movement activities in previous generations were at least of college age. Our participants were high school students, so the present findings may represent a developmental effect.

As hypothesized, adolescents' overall involvement was positively associated with civic judgments regarding community service, standard political, and social movement involvement, as well as fewer personal justifications. These results suggest that with increasing involvement, adolescents

were less likely to conceptualize civic involvement as a personal issue. Instead they viewed citizens as being more obligated to participate, and interestingly, allotted more respect to individuals who were more involved.

Whereas the model of adolescents' overall activity had a marginal fit, the model of individual activities as separate predictors of adolescents' civic judgments provided a robust statistical fit to the data and also demonstrated specificity in associations between judgments and behavior. Adolescents who were more involved in volunteering and service viewed community service as more obligatory and more worthy of respect. Likewise, although adolescents distinguished between standard political and social movement involvement in their ratings and justifications, more politically involved adolescents rated both types of political involvement as more obligatory and more worthy of respect. Much research has found that adolescents' extracurricular and community group involvement is associated with multiple positive developmental outcomes such as reduced problem behaviors (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003). In the present study, we found that engagement in these activities was not associated with adolescents' broader civic conceptualizations.

In light of the arguments that religious involvement may increase civic engagement (Crystal & DeBell, 2002), it is also interesting that more religiously involved adolescents were less likely to view community service involvement as obligatory and worthy of respect. These analyses controlled for adolescents' volunteering and service involvement, and many religiously involved adolescents may have also volunteered and done community service. Still, it is uncertain why religiously involved adolescents who were low in volunteering did not prioritize community service.

The present study is cross-sectional, so it is not clear whether adolescents' civic judgments led to greater involvement or vice versa. However, the findings are consistent with previous research, which has found that adolescents' conceptualizations of behaviors such as drug use are associated with their involvement in those activities (Nucci et al., 1991). Although the different civic and organized activities examined here are all organized activities, generally prosocial in nature, and involve participation outside of the classroom, they provide adolescents with unique experiences that could lead to changes in adolescents' conceptualizations of the specific types of activities in which they are involved. Alternatively, adolescents who

conceptualize civic involvement in moral or conventional terms may seek out more opportunities to engage in those activities. The relationship between judgments and behavior are likely to be reciprocal, as judgments motivate adolescents to engage in specific types of civic activities, and these unique experiences, in turn, influence the manner in which they conceptualize civic involvement.

A strength of the present study was that we examined adolescents' civic conceptualizations with measures that tapped multiple dimensions, and we used the results across multiple dimensions to infer students' domain categorization. However, we did rely on self-reports, and social desirability may have led some adolescents to overreport their involvement in various activities. Future research could utilize semistructured interviews so that more elaboration of adolescents' conceptualizations of civic involvement can be obtained. Although the ethnic makeup of the present study was representative of the community, the sample was primarily White. Social theorists have posited that underrepresented ethnic groups in America may view civic involvement differently (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002), and future research should examine these differences in other samples.

The present findings contribute to knowledge about adolescents' civic and moral reasoning and also suggest the importance of measuring different types of involvement in future civic development research. Adolescents appear to have multifaceted views about civic responsibility that are intertwined with their own civic activities, so assessing adolescents' civic reasoning may be important for future civic research. The present findings also may be relevant to future civic education and citizenship development efforts. Democratic forms of government require an informed and engaged populous (Flanagan & Faison, 2002), and civic researchers have focused on adolescent involvement as a possible mechanism for increasing civic involvement in adulthood. Citizens may be less involved if they view civic engagement as personal activities rather than as entailing civic or moral obligation. Therefore civic beliefs and reasoning may be an important outcome for measuring the effectiveness of civic learning programs. Finally, this study potentially provides a new perspective on the link between adolescent and adult civic involvement. Adolescents' civic involvement may lead adolescents to view civic activities as moral and conventional rather than personal, which then could contribute to the continuation of civic behaviors into adulthood.

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