

Psychosocial correlates and motivations for Civic Engagement among adolescents

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Abstract

The role of social participation during adolescence and young people has received increasing attention in the psychosocial and developmental literature (e.g., Flanagan, Faison, 2001; Gelli, 2007; Albanesi, Cicognani, Zani, 2007; Cicognani, Zani, in press)

This study investigated different forms of social participation (political participation, civic involvement, alternative forms of participation and school participation) in a sample of Italian adolescents and differences according to age and gender. A further aim was to assess the relationships between the different forms of participation and some psychosocial variables; in particular, belonging to formal groups, civic responsibility, civic competence, indicators of the perceived quality of the relationships with the local community and the school, social trust were considered.

A questionnaire was submitted to 323 adolescents, 76% female, attending the fourth and the fifth year of high school and living in a medium size town in Central Italy. The instrument included an assessment of social participation (items adapted from Flanagan et al., 2007), belonging to formal groups, civic competence and civic responsibility (Flanagan et al., 2007), sense of community (Cicognani et al., 2006), identification with the local community (adapted from Brown et al., 1986), school climate, social trust (ad hoc items). Moreover, to assess motivations for participation a set of four open-ended questions were included.

Results confirm the differences according to age and gender in the types of participation activities. Young people's motivations for engagement differ partly according to the form of participation considered (political, alternative forms, civic, school participation). Higher participation levels are positively associated to sense of community, identification with the group, and self-efficacy. Implications of results for the promotion of civic engagement will be discussed.

Introduction

The role of social participation during adolescence and young adulthood has received increasing attention in the psychosocial and developmental literature (e.g., Flanagan, Faison, 2001; Gelli, 2007; Albanesi, Cicognani, Zani, 2007; Cicognani, Zani, in press). Within the *positive youth development* approach (Lerner, 2000) there is consensus on the positive role of different forms of involvement (e.g. extracurricular, volunteering, religious groups, sports groups, political participation, etc.) in enhancing social skills building, in constructing a network of supportive relationships, in reducing psychosocial risk and increasing well being. Participation experience of adolescents are an important pathway in future active participation and political development (Azavedo, Menezes, 2008). Several research studies examined the factors which facilitate and promote youth engagement and participation in their community. However, limited attention has been devoted to the investigation of the specificities of the different domains/contexts of youth participation, in terms of both psychosocial predictors and motivations for engagement.

The definition of civic engagement, especially in adolescents, is controversial: It refers to both community involvement and political voice (Flanagan et al., 2005), It involves all six C's of the Positive Youth Development Approach (Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, Caring, and Contribution); it builds the C's and rests on them (Sherrod, 2007.)

It promotes the positive development of the future generations and it is the only way for civil society to flourish

Generally it has been taken for granted that civic participation implies pro-social and pro-societal motives. However, the decision of young people to follow the activities of a group or of their community might be based on different motivations

Aims and Hypotheses

One aim of this study was to investigate different forms of social participation (political participation, civic involvement, alternative forms of participation and school participation) in a sample of Italian adolescents (high school students) and differences according to age and gender. A second aim was to assess the relationships between the different forms of participation and some psychosocial variables; in particular, we considered belonging to formal groups, civic responsibility, civic competence, indicators of the perceived quality of the relationships with the local community (sense of community and identification) and the school (school climate), social trust (in politics and in people in general). Differences according to sociodemographic variables (age, gender) were considered.

Our Hypotheses were the following:

Hyp.1 Engagement in politics is lower compared to other forms of civic engagements

Hyp. 2 There are differences according to gender and age in civic engagement: Males will be higher in conventional political engagement compared to female; the older adolescents will be higher in civic engagement (different forms) compared to younger adolescents

Hyp. 3 There are different predictors of the different forms of civic engagement:

For engagement in conventional politics the predictors are civic competence, civic mindedness, social trust

The alternative forms of participation will be predicted by group identification and civic competence

Involvement in community issues will be best predicted by sense of community and community identification, civic competence, civic mindedness, values, social trust

For School participation the predictors will be group identification, school climate, civic competence, civic mindedness

Mehod

Participants

Participants were 323 adolescents living in a medium size town in Central Italy, attending the fourth and the fifth year of high school. 76 were male (23,5%) and 247 female (76,5%). 162 (50,2%) were 17-18 years-old and 161(49,8%) 19-20 years-old. 46.7% of the sample belongs to at least one formal group; of these, the most typical group is sport group (attended by 32.3% of the sample). A lower percentage of adolescents belong to religious groups and volunteer groups (5%), music groups (6.3%), political group (2.2%), scouts (1.9%). 27,7% of the sample has been (or is presently) class or school representative

Measures

A self-administered questionnaire (anonymous) was submitted at school, during class time, after obtaining the consent of School Authorities. The completion requires about 30 minutes. The instrument included the following.

- *Social participation.* Measures were partly drawn and adapted from Flanagan et al. (2007). Political participation was assessed by 6 items measuring active involvement (3 items, *Voting at elections*, *Openly supporting a political candidate*, *Volunteer for a political party*; response alternatives from 1= never to 4=often); political interest (2 items, *Keeping updated on politics in Italy*, *Keeping updated on foreign politics*; response alternatives from 1= never to 4=often and 1 item, *I enjoy talking about politics and political issues*; response alternatives from 1=not at all to 4=a lot). Civic participation was measured by 5 items (*Do volunteer work to help needy people*; *Get involved in issues like health or safety that affect your community*; *Work with a group to solve a problem in the community where one lives*; *Donating money*; *Actively supporting organizations that help disadvantaged people*; response alternatives from 1= never to 4=often). Non conventional forms of participation were measured by 4 items (*Refusing to buy products from companies exploiting workers*; *Participate in protests, marches, demonstrations*; *Expressing one's views about politics on a website, blog or chat room*; *Participate to youth forums, musical events, where young people can express their political views*; response alternatives from 1= never to 4=often). School participation was assessed by 5 items (participation in assembly of the school, participation to the school activities), response alternatives from 1=never to 5= always); *Are you interested in school issues? Do you engage yourself to solve school problems?*, response alternatives from 1=not at all to 5=a lot). Moreover, an ad hoc question was included asking whether students were presently (or had been formerly) class/school representatives (yes/no).
- *Formal groups membership:* participants were asked to indicate to which groups they belonged, by choosing in a list.
- *Sense of community* referred to the town of residence was measured by a short version (20 items) of the Sense of Community scale for adolescents (Cicognani, Albanesi, Zani, 2006), measuring 5 dimensions of SoC: *sense of belonging*, *emotional connection with the community*, *emotional connection with peers*, *satisfaction of needs and opportunities for involvement*, *opportunities for influence*) (response alternatives from 1=completely disagree to 7= completely agree). Cronbach alpha for the total scale is .92.
- *Community identification* was measured by an adapted version of the Group identification scale (Brown et al.,1987), including 5 items (response alternatives from 1=completely disagree to 7= completely agree); Cronbach alpha was .90.
- *Civic competence* was assessed by the scale Competence for civic action (Flanagan et al., 2007), including 9 items (response scale from 1=definitely not to 5= definitely yes). Alpha was .87.
- *Civic responsibility* was assessed by 9 items partly drawn from the Personally responsible citizen scale (Flanagan et al., 2007) and partly from the Civic mindedness scale (Flanagan et. 2007) (response alternatives from 1=not at all to 5=completely). Cronbach alpha was .75.

- *School climate* was measured by 8 items drawn partly from the scale “Student ownership” and partly from the scale “Classroom as a caring community” of Flanagan et al. (2007)(response alternatives from 1=not at all to 5=a lot). Alpha for the total scale is .80.
- *Trust*. Three ad hoc items were included to measure trust in political representatives and in local administrators, and trust in people in general (response alternatives from 1=not at all to 5=completely).

Results

Forms of social participation

Table 1 displays the percentages of answers to the items measuring the different forms of social participation.

Table 1 – Political, non conventional, civic participation and school participation (Frequencies and %)

	1	2	3
	<i>Never</i>	<i>Seldom/ some times</i>	<i>Often</i>
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION			
Voting at elections	285 (87,7 %)	26 (8 %)	13 (4 %)
Openly supporting a political candidate	266 (81,8 %)	42 (12,9 %)	17 (5,2 %)
Volunteer for a political party	305 (93,8 %)	14 (4,3 %)	6 (1,8 %)
Keeping updated on politics in Italy	36 (11,1 %)	186 (57,2 %)	103 (31,7 %)
Keeping updated on foreign politics	89 (27,4 %)	186 (57,5 %)	49 (15,1 %)
I enjoy talking about politics and political issues(*)	104 (32%)	132 (40,6%)	89 (17,4%)
NON CONVENTIONAL PARTICIPATION			
Refusing to buy products from companies exploiting workers	115 (35,4 %)	186 (57,2 %)	24 (7,4 %)
Partecipate in protests, marches, demonstrations	125 (38,5 %)	179 (55,1 %)	21 (6,5 %)
Expressing one’s views about politics on a website, blog or chatroom	215 (66,2 %)	91 (28 %)	19 (5,8 %)
Partecipate to youth forums, musical events, where young people can express their political views	198 (60,9 %)	99 (30,5 %)	28 (8,6 %)
CIVIC PARTICIPATION			
Do volunteer work to help needy people	154 (47,4 %)	153 (47,1 %)	17 (5,2 %)
Get involved in issues like health or safety that affect your community	176 (54,2 %)	140 (43,1 %)	8 (2,5 %)
Work with a group to solve a problem in the community where one lives	193 (59,4 %)	128 (39,4 %)	4 (1,2 %)
Donating money	147 (45,2 %)	158 (48,6 %)	19 (5,8 %)
Actively supporting organizations that help disadvantaged people	161 (49,5 %)	144 (44,3 %)	20 (6,2 %)
SCHOOL PARTICIPATION			
Participation to the assembly of the schoolt (**)	89 (27,4 %)	117 (36 %)	119 (36,6 %)
Participation to the school activities (**)	101 (31,1 %)	150 (46,2 %)	73 (22,5 %)
Are you interested in school issues? (***)	85 (27.1%)	122 (37,2%)	117 (36%)
Do you engage yourself to solve school problems? (***)			

(*) 1=not at all; 2=seldom/some times; 3=often

(**) 1=never/rarely; 2=sometimes; 3=often/always (***) 1=not at all/a little; 2=undecided; 3=a lot

Levels of participation differ according to the domain. Considering political interest, participants appear interested in knowing about politics in Italy, and to a lesser extent foreign politics. About two thirds at least sometimes enjoy talking about politics. Active involvement in political groups is less frequent and only 2.2% of the sample belongs to a political group. Voting is low, also because of the age of the sample (the legal voting age is 18) and because of lack of concrete opportunities to vote in the recent past. Civic participation is not very high either. About half of the sample has been involved at least some times in one of the activities indicated. Also, non conventional participation concerns only less than two thirds of the sample, at least some times, and particularly boycott and participation to protests and marches. Only one third of the sample has at least some times expressed his/her own opinions on a blog, chat, forum and similar. School participation is slightly more frequent, particularly participation to assemblies and general interest toward school issues.

Factor analysis on the items of social participation (excluding voting behaviours and being a class/school representative) lead to the extraction of 5 factors (Varimax rotation), explaining 59.21% of the total variance. The first factor corresponds to **Civic participation** (5 items, Expl. Var. 25.03%); the second factor included **Political interest** (3 items, Expl. Var. 11.81%); the third factor is **School participation** (4 items, Expl. Var. 9.41%); the fourth factor corresponds to **Non conventional participation** (4 items, Expl. Var. 6.86%) and the last factor includes the two items of **Political participation** (Expl. Var. 6.09%). For each factor, a summary score was computed calculating the mean of the specific items.

The five scales are positively and significantly correlated (with r values ranging from $r=.13, p<.05$, to $r=.41, p<.001$).

Table 2 - Forms of participation: differences according to gender and age group (range 1-4)

	Male	Female	Younger	Older
Political participation	1.37	1.18*	1.26	1.29
Political interest	2.65	2.33**	2.37	2.61*
Non conventional participation	1.81	1.83	1.75	1.89
Civic participation	1.67	1.77	1.69	1.75
School participation _a	2.62	2.67	2.69	2.61

_arange 1-5 * $p<.05$ ** $p<.005$

Significant differences according to gender (see Table 2) were found for Political participation, $F(1,322)=6.36, p=.012$, and Political interest, $F(1,322)=8.81, p=.003$: male adolescents score higher than females. A main effect of age ($F(1,322)=4.94, p=.027$) and an interaction between gender and age ($F(1,322)=6.23, p=.013$) were also found: the increase in political interest with age occurs only among males (younger $M=2.40$ older $M=2.91$; younger females $M=2.34$, older females $M=2.31$).

Predictors of forms of social participation

Table 3 presents the psychosocial correlates of the different forms of civic engagement..

Table 3 – Psychosocial correlates: descriptive statistics (M and SD)

	<i>M (SD)</i>
<i>Sense of community_a</i>	
Sense of belonging	4.31 (1.56)
Emotional connection with the community	3.04 (1.18)
Emotional connection with peers	4.25 (1.55)
Satisfaction of needs and opportunities for involvement	2.95 (1.28)
Opportunities for influence	4.50 (1.30)
<i>Identification with community_a</i>	
<i>Civic competence_b</i>	2.94 (.81)
<i>Civic responsibility_b</i>	4.07 (.54)
<i>School climate_b</i>	
<i>Trust</i>	
Trust in political representatives _b	1.81 (.77)
Trust in people in general _b	2.71 (.94)

_arange 1-7

_brange 1-5

Male adolescents score higher than females in Sense of belonging (M=4.66 vs F=4.20) ($F(1,322)=4.97$ $p<.05$), Emotional connection with the community (M=3.29 vs F=2.96) ($F(1,322)=4.52$ $p<.05$), and Satisfaction of needs and opportunities for involvement (M=3.28 vs F=2.82) ($F(1,322)=7.21$ $p<.01$).

Civic responsibility is higher among females (M=4.11) than males (M=3.92) ($F(1,322)=7.02$ $p<.01$). Moreover, only among male adolescents it decreases with age (IV M=4.07 vs V M=3.78) ($F(1,322)=4.44$ $p<.05$).

Trust in people decreases with age ($F(1,322)=5.19$ $p<.05$) (IV M=2.83 vs V M=2.54). No other difference was significant.

To assess predictors of forms of social participation a Stepwise Regression analysis was performed. Predictors included were the following: belonging to at least one formal group (yes/no), civic responsibility, civic competence, sense of community (five subscales), identification with the community, school climate, trust in political persons (members of the Government and local administrators), trust in people in general, experience of class/school representative.

Considering *political participation*, significant predictors are civic competence ($beta .18^{***}$), trust in political representatives ($beta .15^{**}$) and experience as class/school representative ($beta .14^*$) ($R^2 .08$). Also political interest is positively predicted by civic competence ($beta .22^{***}$), experience as class/school representative ($beta .15^{**}$) and trust in political representatives ($beta .13^*$) ($R^2 .10$). So, adolescents who are more inclined to this form of participation are those who feel competent in performing civic actions, who have experienced the role of class/school representative and who trust political members.

Civic participation is positively affected by civic competence ($beta .24^{***}$), trust in people ($beta .19^{**}$), experience of class/school representative ($beta .13^*$) and civic responsibility ($beta .11^*$) ($R^2 .17$).

Non conventional forms of participation are influenced by civic competence ($beta .28^{***}$), lower levels of identification with the community ($beta -.21^{***}$) and sense of community in the subscale "opportunities of influence" ($beta .13^*$). Adolescents who prefer alternative forms of participation feel competent in civic action and perceive the possibility of having influence over the community; however, they show a lower level of identification with the local community. ($R^2 .13$).

School participation is favoured by perceived school climate (β .32***), civic competence (β .16**) and experience as class/school representative (β .13*) (R^2 .16).

Discussion and conclusion

Summarizing the results obtained, all forms of participation are positively influenced by perception of civic competence: adolescents need to feel capable of performing civic actions in order to actively engage in their community. Having experienced an important formal role as class/school representative positively contributes to political, civic and school participation, but not non conventional forms (which by definition, are generally performed not in formal contexts and through conventional channels, but more typically with “original” non conventional actions in opposition to existing conditions). Trust in political representatives is important for actively engaging in politics, as well as trust in people is necessary for engaging in civic actions in the community. Civic participation also requires civic responsibility. Sense of community referred to the school community (school climate) is important for school participation, whereas sense of community referred to the local community is relevant only in the subscale of perceive opportunities for influence, which affects non conventional participation, indicating that, in order to actively engage in alternative actions (e.g. protests, boycott), adolescents need to perceive that their action will produce an impact. Identification with the community negatively affects non conventional participation: this finding, which is consistent with findings on the complex relationship between sense of community and participation from adults (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009) seems to suggest that a low identification with the community may be the indicator of a critical attitude toward their living context, which may be a motivating factor in promoting non conventional participation in order to produce changes of life conditions.

In conclusion, results indicate that, in order to participate in the different community contexts (school and community), adolescents need some basic skills (e.g. civic competence); however, more specific conditions are needed for affecting participation in the different domains and contexts. Having a significant social role or being involved in a structured group/organisation (e.g. school representative, engagement in a formal group such as a sports group or similar) can be considered as structural resources and “assets” which enhance active formal participation (political, civic, school), consistently with the bulk of literature on the role of belonging to organised contexts in enhancing social participation (Albanesi et al. 2007). Non conventional participation has a more specific profile of psychosocial predictors.

So, both commonalities and differences in psychosocial antecedents of participation exist, requiring a more differentiated and articulated approach in research. In particular, results may help clarify the often inconsistent relationship between sense of community and participation, suggesting the need to differentiate both dimensions of sense of community (instead of investigating sense of community as a global construct) and domains/contexts of social participation.

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