INTRODUCTION

ENGAGED CITIZENS? POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG YOUTH, WOMEN, MINORITIES, AND MIGRANTS

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Many studies have revealed that conventional forms of political participation, especially among young people, women, minorities and migrants, are currently in decline (e.g., Blais & Dobrzynska 1998; Franklin 2002; International IDEA 2004; Putnam 2000). However, two different explanations have been put forward to explain this phenomenon: some authors argue that political apathy and alienation are increasing, whereas others argue that a shift is taking place from traditional forms of political participation to voluntary and less direct participatory activities using new means of social/political communication (Forbrig 2005; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins & Delli Carpini 2006).

Current theories about political participation and social engagement take into account factors at the macro level (e.g., historical, institutional, political, demographic), the social level (e.g., family, school, peer group) and the micro level (e.g., collective efficacy, self-efficacy, trust) (Dalton & Klingemann 2007). However, the social and psychological processes that mediate the influence of these factors in promoting or hindering participation are not well understood.

In particular the following research questions deserve more attention and analysis from theoretical and empirical points of view:

What does it mean for young people today to be a citizen and to be engaged?

Is there still a gender gap in political and civic participation?

Are there differences in patterns of participation between ethnic/national groups?

When and under what conditions does individual latent participation become manifest participation?

What are the opportunity structures for effective and influential civic engagement and political participation?

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What are the best predictors of participation, and how can these predictors be harnessed to enhance levels of participation?

The 12 contributions that form this special issue, drawing on different fields of psychology, speculate and suggest evidence-based explanations on issues such as:

1. New and old forms of youth participation and engagement
2. Participation among minorities and migrant groups
3. The role of psychological and psychosocial variables
4. Gender perspectives on the experience and practice of citizenship
5. Contextual and institutional factors that enhance or impede participation.

1. New and old forms of youth participation and engagement

First of all, it is useful to clarify the terms/concepts we will use, based on a conceptual distinction between 'political participation' and 'civic participation'. Amnå and Ekman's typology of participation (in this issue) suggests a 'new look' into the conceptualization of civic and political participation, by widening the types of behaviours that might be relevant to understanding what enhances and what hinders youth participation.

We use the term **'political participation'** to refer to activity that has the intent or effect of influencing either regional, national or supranational governance, either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of individuals who make that policy (after Verba, Schlozman & Brady 1995). Political participation takes a number of different forms, including both **conventional forms** which involve electoral processes (e.g., voting, election campaigning and running for election), and **non-conventional forms** of activity which occur outside electoral processes (e.g., signing petitions, participating in political demonstrations, displaying a symbol or sign representing support for a political cause, membership of political campaigning organizations, writing letters to politicians and public officials, etc.).

By contrast, we use the term **'civic participation'** to refer to voluntary activity focused on helping others, achieving a public good or solving a community problem, including work undertaken either alone or in cooperation with others in order to effect change (after Zukin et al., 2006). Under this heading, we include a variety of activities such as working collectively to solve a community problem, belonging to community organizations, attending meetings about issues of concern, raising money for charity, helping neighbours, and consumer activism (boycotting and buycotting).

In our perspective, **'participation'** is construed as behavioural, with the term being used to refer to participatory behaviours. **'Engagement'** can be differentiated from participation, even if it is related to it, and is defined as: having an interest in, paying attention to, having knowledge of or having opinions about either political or civic matters. As such, engagement is psychological rather than behavioural. Engagement can be indexed in many different ways, for example via levels of political or civic knowledge, levels of attention to media sources such as newspapers, television news or news on the internet, and the extent to which an individual discusses politics or civic affairs with family or friends.

Amnå and Ekman (this issue) offer a **new typology of political and civic engagement and participation**. Their typology aims to capture all forms of relevant attitudes and

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behaviour, and considers participation at both the individual level and the collective level. It also discriminates between latent and manifest forms of political behaviour. Importantly, the typology incorporates a non-participation category in order to capture the full spectrum of participation, with this non-participation category being further divided into two in order to discriminate between those that are apolitical and those that are antipolitical. This typology helps to shed new light onto the meaning of non-participation, suggesting a more nuanced view and introducing the novel concept of the **'stand-by citizen'** (i.e., a person who is engaged with and shows interest in politics but who does not actually participate), thus going beyond the conventional active/passive dichotomy. McBride (2012) further warns us that "an account of political participation which exalts the ideal of the engaged citizen, risks framing those who do not participate in negative ways". This risk is particularly important when we attempt to understand the participation of migrants and minorities, who in some cases do not have real opportunities to participate for institutional reasons.

From a psychological perspective, this suggests the need to go beyond actual participatory behaviours (or the absence of expected participatory behaviours) in order to shed light on underlying psychological factors (e.g. motivations, subjective meanings and representations). Such an attempt might eventually reveal participation forms and clusters of participatory behaviours that differ from conventional ones. These new forms may be based on common underlying motives and functions (individual factors and predispositions, which are the central focus of psychological theories of participation), and on structural opportunities which are available in different contexts for different groups (e.g., institutional and contextual factors). The implication here is that such forms of behaviour may vary across both countries and groups.

The interest of some researchers has recently concentrated on unusual forms of non-conventional participation, including writing graffiti with a political message on walls and illegal actions such as burning a flag. Fournier et al.'s paper (this issue) examined such **illegal acts of participation** among French-speaking youth in Belgium. They found that the factors which predicted the frequency with which boys and girls engaged in such acts differed. However, for both boys and girls, committing these kinds of illegal acts was related to their participation in more conventional forms of action. Thus, non-conventional acts are not necessarily opposed to or alternative to conventional forms, but complement them. Both behaviours are linked.

Another new form of participation recently adopted by a large number of young people around the world, starting from the Arab Spring, is through **the internet**: see Passini's paper (this issue) on the Facebook and Twitter revolution. Some authors have argued that that these new social media enable young people to engage in a form of low-risk activism based on weak social ties and low motivation, best characterised as 'slacktivism'. However, as Passini argues, the internet enables social groups to express their points of view to large numbers of individuals (previously only possible through expensive publicity machines), and also helps to provide logistical assistance in the practical coordination of protests. Further advantages are that the internet does not require a unified party line, it allows disparate groups to develop ties with each other, and it can also foster the motivation to participate in subsequent events.

One important question addressed more recently in the literature is related to the deeper meaning and value of participation. Most research has considered participation

in an uncritical way, as a civic virtue and as a positive value, and rarely admits openly that it can have detrimental consequences on political attitudes and dispositions. As Fernandes-Jesus et al. (this issue) suggest, participation does not always lead to positive changes in political efficacy or to dispositions to become involved in the future. Instead, it is necessary to investigate the characteristics of participative behaviour, in particular the combination between opportunities for action and reflection in a supportive environment where pluralism and dissent are valued—i.e., the quality of participation—which seems not only to characterise many current civic and political experiences, but also to foster relevant attitudes, dispositions and behaviours. The results of their study suggest that the **quality of civic and political participation experiences** significantly influences political attitudes: in particular, higher quality participation experiences promote higher political efficacy and more dispositions to be politically active in the future. It is also worth noting that the quality of experience impacts differently on different groups of migrant people (as in the case of Angolan- vs. Brazilian-origin people in Portugal).

2. Participation among minorities and migrant groups

Research on participation by ethnic minority and migrant groups is relatively recent, but has revealed that such populations are no less active than majority groups, although the forms of participation may be different because they are focused more on issues relating to their status as minorities (Pachi and Barrett, this issue).

Europe is a multicultural continent, and European people have proved their capacity to live together in diversity and to build a common future together. Recently, however, multiculturalism has faced many difficulties at a national level in various European countries, and it is becoming more frequent to hear that the policy of multiculturalism has failed. The response to these difficulties is an intercultural approach which implies active interaction and dialogue between the culturally different groups within societies in order to develop the best model of 'living together' (Council of Europe 2008, 2011).

However, restrictive criteria and practices frequently prevent minorities and migrants from participating fully in the political life of the country in which they live. Their participation is crucially dependent on the political institutions and opportunities that are made available to them in their country of residence, for example, the ease or difficulty of naturalisation, whether election rules grant or deny them voting rights, the extent to which political institutions have formal consultative bodies or channels for liaising with minority and migrant groups, and the extent to which institutions facilitate the political representation of such groups (Ireland 1994). Different countries vary considerably in the extent to which they provide institutions and processes to permit and support the political participation of minority and migrant groups.

That said, members of minority and migrant groups do usually have access to opportunities for participation through their community organisations, through trade union membership and union politics (if they are in employment) and through membership of pressure groups (e.g. anti-racist, human rights or environmental organisations). Because access to these arenas is not subject to the same legal restrictions as access to the political arena, these other arenas may be much more open for participation by members of minority

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and migrant groups. However, experiences of racism and discrimination may still act as a significant barrier and may lead these individuals to engage primarily only with their own ethnic community organisations (Ireland 1994; Penninx, Martiniello & Vertovec 2004).

Participation by minority and migrant individuals also varies according to a wide range of psychological and demographic factors, including their knowledge of civic and political institutions, their political values, their linguistic skills, their social capital, the length of time that has been spent in the country of residence, as well as their educational level, employment, income, gender (and, in the case of women, marriage status) and age (with several of these demographic factors being inter-related) (Martiniello 2005, 2006).

Minorities and migrant groups are considered by many of the papers in this issue, considering different aspects of these problems. Greco Morasso in her paper (this issue) suggests that **learning** is a precondition for a migrant's interest and engagement with the host country's culture and institutions. She considers the complex relation between migrants' interest in their host country and their consequent civic or social engagement, and shows how migrants have to engage in complex processes of identity definition, trying to make sense of their situation, and learning new knowledge and social, cognitive and practical skills.

Ataman et al. (this issue) instead compare minority (Roma) and majority (Turkish) youth in Turkey. They found that almost all the youth, both minority and majority, felt that they **lacked information about their rights and obligations as citizens** and perceived a range of **barriers against political participation**. However, the minority and majority youth differed in their perceptions, with Roma youth (who suffer from high levels of discrimination and unemployment) viewing economic participation as being far more important than political participation. In contrast, many of the Turkish youth had interests in social issues but ascribed their lack of participation to their age, their lack of time and a lack of information. These findings draw attention to the fact that individuals' perceptions of participation are closely tied to their own **life contexts**, and that boosting the participation of different ethnic groups will probably require attention to quite different factors depending on the circumstances of their lives.

Similar conclusions emerge from Petrovičová et al.'s (this issue) study of Czech, Roma and Ukrainian youth in the Czech Republic, which also found differences in the patterns of understanding of citizenship that were displayed by the members of these three ethnic groups. Further evidence to support the notion that there is **widespread variability between ethnic groups** in this domain emerges from Pachi and Barrett's study (this issue). Pachi and Barrett compared English, Bangladeshi and Congolese youth living in London, and examined these youths' judgements of the effectiveness of different forms of political and civic participation. They found differences in these perceptions across the three ethnic groups, but in addition they found variation within each ethnic group as a function of gender and age. They argue that these individuals' perceptions are differentially shaped by their life circumstances, which can only be properly understood in terms of the **intersection between ethnicity, gender and age**.

3. The role of psychological and psychosocial variables

Similar to other forms of behaviour, youth political participation and engagement can be understood as a product of the interaction between personal characteristics and environmental

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influences, coming from contexts of varying proximity (Bronfenbrenner 1979). While sociology and political science analyse the institutional determinants of civic engagement, social networks and capital, or political culture (van Deth, Montero & Westholm 2007; Putnam 2000), the specific contribution of a psychological approach stems from its interest in micro-level aspects of engagement, such as motivations, beliefs, emotions, dispositions, internal efficacy, and perceptions of parental and peer group norms.

In this issue, attention has been given to several psychological variables considered to be predictors of political involvement and participation. One such variable is the **perceived effectiveness** of specific forms of political and civic action, which is a significant predictor of an individual's willingness to undertake that action. Pachi and Barrett (this issue) show that low external efficacy is the main factor that appears to drive perceptions of ineffectiveness in many young people independently of ethnicity, age or gender, although this characteristic is deployed differently by different groups in relationship to different forms of action. The findings of their study confirm the importance of efficacy for political participation already found in the literature, but they also underline the need to take into account the **specific forms of action** involved, the targets of these actions, and the characteristics of the individual involved.

Forms of participation, both new and old, are also shaped by the **concepts of citizenship** which individuals hold. In their paper, Petrovičová et al. (this issue) examine the concepts held by Czech, Roma and Ukrainian youth in the Czech Republic. They found complex multidimensional concepts with two very different orientations, one based on an awareness of inequalities and emphasising that citizenship is something that needs to be worked for by trying to influence the policies of the state and by challenging dominant perspectives and norms, the other emphasising that citizenship is given by the state to provide opportunities and to grant certain rights that may or may not be utilized by citizens. These two different conceptions were linked to different orientations to participation. In other words, differences in patterns of participation appear to be rooted in different subjective understandings of citizenship.

Personal commitment to community is a further psychological precursor to political involvement because the community is a context that is closer to individual experiences but is connected to the most distant societal realm that includes politics. Crocetti et al. (this issue) examined this commitment in both American and Italian youth. They found that American youth displayed higher levels of commitment and higher levels of political involvement than Italian youth. However, they also found that personal commitment to community was strongly and positively associated with involvement in political activities in both groups of adolescents, strongly supporting the notion that this commitment is an important precursor to political action. This has an important implication, in that fostering personal commitments to community could potentially lead youth to political engagement and participation.

Another important psychosocial variable in this context is the **sense of belonging** to a specific social group or community. Brondi et al. (this issue) examined how Italian youth perceive themselves as members of a local community, their perceptions of environmental threats to their community, the solutions which they would propose to deal with these threats, and their levels of pro-environmental activism. It was found that these young people had a strong sense of belonging to and ownership of their community, and that their pro-environmental activism was related to their social integration and social contribution. Perhaps most importantly of all, however, the study found that these young people wanted to be

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involved in discussions of solutions to environmental problems, underlining the need for local institutions to give youth **opportunities to express their views** on local community matters.

4. Gender perspectives on the experience and practice of citizenship

Gender perspectives on political participation examine the conditions governing women's versus men's engagement and participation. Most studies of the **gendered nature of political participation** have focused on political interest, turnout, political action and participation in voluntary organisations, seeking to identify gender gaps in political behaviour through comparative analysis (e.g., Burns, Schlozman & Verba 2001; Inglehart & Norris 2003). In general, these studies concur on a number of variables that influence gender differences in political participation. These include age, education, labour force participation, marriage, women's role as mothers and home-makers, the level of economic development of a country, and the religion of a country.

Men and women often have a different focus when it comes to political engagement, with men being more likely to be interested in economic and foreign policy matters and women more interested in social and environmental issues. Women are also more likely to participate in informal political action, although women's participation is more likely to take the form of individualised rather than group activities. Women's participation in voluntary associations is particularly important. Both trade union and church membership act as important contexts for civic and political participation. As women are more likely than men to be involved in church-based organisations, these can be a particularly important context for women's acquisition of an interest in, and knowledge of, political affairs.

Thus, previous research suggests a wide range of potential factors that act, and interact, to produce gendered patterns of political participation. In some countries, like Italy for example, a **gender gap** is evident in politics, in public administration, and also in civil society: women tend to be more involved than men in voluntary work, but they occupy leading positions in less than 30% of cases. Albanesi et al. (this issue) discuss the different paths that lead males and females to participate, in particular when individual forms of participation are considered. Their findings suggest that this could be a result of specific **gender socialization processes** that begin at home. Young people experience and observe gender roles at home, where they are still confronted with (unequal) labour division; at home they start building their (future) political orientations. Both gender studies and research on civic and political participation assign a large influence to **parents** in shaping adolescents' perspectives and behaviours, but of course the family is only one of the relevant sources of influence in adolescents' experience.

A gender perspective is particularly useful for exploring the differences which are often found when testing explanatory models on boys and girls separately. As has been noted already, Fournier et al. (this issue) found **different predictors of illegal forms of participation** in boys and in girls. The perception of the efficaciousness of these acts predicted participation among both boys and girls. However, among boys, participation was also predicted by several other variables, including perceptions of personal discrimination, restricted personal choice, and low general interest in politics. By contrast, among girls, participation was predicted by low levels of pro-sociality. These are intriguing findings which, however, a gender perspective can help to interpret. As Fournier et al. point out,

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gender stereotypes still exist, with females being expected to be less involved in the public sphere and more involved in providing care and being the moral guardians of pro-social values. It is for this reason that girls who participate in illegal participatory actions (which are stereotypically masculine behaviours) are low on the pro-social attitudes which are socially ascribed to their gender group.

5. Contextual and institutional factors that enhance or impede participation

Civic and political participation are not influenced only by psychological and social factors. They are also influenced by **macro level contextual factors**. These factors include the characteristics of a country's demographic structure, electoral system, political institutions and processes, legal and human rights institutions and processes, associations and organisations, cultural practices, economy and recent history. These various factors between them create a set of political opportunity structures for the people living within a country, and these structures have a demonstrable impact on the civic engagement, political engagement, voting behaviour, other forms of conventional participation, non-conventional participation and civic participation of the people who live within that country's borders (Brunton-Smith 2011; Geys 2006; Ireland 1994; Koopmans & Statham 1999; Kriesi, Koopmans & Duyvendak 1995; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald & Schulz 2001).

Several papers in this issue provide new information about these wider contextual factors. For example, Boffi (this issue) examines **the role of politicians** in shaping young people's access to political institutions such as political parties. He shows that politicians within Italy act as cultural selectors through the exercise of their legislative and executive authority which they use to maintain their own positions of power. The end result is that they discourage conventional political participation among the young, and propel youth towards other forms of non-conventional and civic participation. Boffi argues that young people's disaffection with politics in Italy is largely due to the prevailing political norms which offer too many privileges to politicians, and to the behaviours of politicians themselves which conflict with their declared principles and citizens' expectations.

The paper by Crocetti et al. (this issue) confirms that young people in Italy do indeed display lower levels of political involvement than, for example, American youth. The use of a cross-national comparative perspective in their study is extremely useful in reminding us that the patterns of engagement and participation which are shown within any one country may well be very different from those shown in another country due to the presence of different macro characteristics. That said, their study also suggests that despite this **cross-national variability**, there may nevertheless be some **common underlying processes** in different countries (e.g., the role that personal commitment to community plays in driving political involvement).

Greco Morasso's paper (this issue) also shows the potential influence of contextual factors. She shows that the **institutional availability of learning opportunities** within a host country (e.g., adult education classes) can be crucial for enabling an international migrant to become interested in and engaged with that country's institutions and culture. Greco Morasso further argues that a migration strategy which is based on learning can assist a migrant in making sense of their new situation and in developing their identity, which in turn enables them to relate positively to their new country of residence.

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Finally, Passini's paper (this issue) reveals how wider **technological developments within society**, in this case the development, availability and widespread use of information technology, can have a major impact on people's patterns of civic and political participation and engagement. The emergence of new platforms such as Facebook and Twitter has enabled citizens to participate civically and politically in ways which would have been unthinkable only 30 years ago.

Conclusions

Together, the various papers in this special issue reveal that research into political participation and social engagement among youth, women, minorities and migrants is a vibrant field of research. However, while there have been enormous advances over recent years in our knowledge of the macro, social and psychological factors that drive engagement and participation, as exemplified by the current papers, many questions still remain unanswered. For example, how macro, social and psychological factors interact in driving patterns of participation is still very poorly understood, because most theories and studies in this field tend to focus upon just one or at most two of these three levels. It is arguable that theoretical explanations now need to move on to considering factors operating at all three levels, and empirical studies also need to move on to utilising cross-national comparative methods to a much greater extent, so that the interaction between macro factors on the one hand, and social and psychological factors on the other, can be examined in detail. In this respect, multinational studies such as the IEA Civic Education Study (Torney-Purta et al. 2001), the IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (Schulz, Ainley, Frailon, Kerr & Losito 2010), and the PIDOP (Processes Influencing Democratic Owernship and Participation) Project (Barrett 2012) point the way to the future for research in this field.

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