Political socialization and human agency. The development of civic engagement from adolescence to adulthood

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A multidisciplinary, longitudinal seven-year research program at Örebro University will take place with support from Riksbankens Jubileumsfond. It is jointly led by professors Erik Amnå (political science; coordinator), Mats Ekström (media and communication studies), Margaret Kerr (psychology) and Håkan Stattin (psychology).

Challenges in previous political socialization research

After decades of a silence, the research field on political socialization now is undergoing revitalization. A number of important studies have been published and there has been an intensification of the theoretical debate, stimulated partly by contemporary changes in political culture and social institutions. There are, however, limitations that can be identified in research. Together they raise at least eight challenges our research program systematically will approach.

1. Conceptualizing young people as active agents in their own socialization, rather than passive objects of socializing institutions

In research from various disciplines, children and youths have most often been seen as passive recipients of socialization rather than active agents with needs and desires that direct their behavior. Schools have been thought to shape students' views by providing knowledge and skills (Campbell et al.1960; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Holmberg and Oscarsson 2004; Milner 2002; Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry 1996; Niemi and Junn 1998; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). Parents have been hypothesized to shape their adolescents through various unidirectional mechanisms (e.g., Pancer and Pratt 1999). Media tend to be seen as influences and young people as passive recipients of exposure (e.g., Chaffee and Yang 1990). Thus, this view cuts across disciplines and research areas.

There are some recent movements toward a more agentic view of youths. In family research, McDevitt (2005) has proposed that discussions adolescents initiate with their parents about political issues drive their political identification and development (and also their parents') (McDevitt 2005; McDevitt and Chaffee 2002). The idea is that news, media, and school stimulate youths to engage their parents in discussions, and when parents

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convey their views, youths can be influenced by them (Kiousis, McDevitt and Wu 2005). In this model, however, adolescents are primarily only active in initiating discussions that give them access to the values that parents have. Achen (2002) proposed a model that assumes youth agency and essentially argues that correlations between youths' and parents' views are spurious. Youths, according to Achen, are not directly influenced by their parents' views. They appear to be, because, in the absence of their own experiences, they use their parents' experiences as the grounds for their choices. To our knowledge, however, this model has not been tested empirically. In research on media, scholars have pointed out the problem of ignoring youth agency. Approaches have been developed that focus on how young people use and appropriate media forms for different activities, projects, and gratifications. Young people have been framed as active agents and socialization as partly a question of media choices, activities, and creativity (Buckingham 2000; Livingstone and Millwood Hargrave 2006; Olsson 2006). When it comes to youths' citizenship-relevant use of new media, however, research is primarily limited to small-scale case studies (e.g., Dahlgren 2003; Dahlgren and Olsson 2006). In short, a challenge for research in media and other areas of political socialization is to develop theories that recognize the agentic nature of youths and to design studies that will allow the possibility of testing different directions of effects.

2. Integrating the different contexts of everyday life, instead of studying one context at time

The research concerning the roles of family, school, media, civil society, and peers in youth political socialization has been extensive, but has to a large extent been divided into different disciplines and research areas focusing on one or two aspects of young people's every day lives. A number of studies have tried to compare the relative explanatory power of media, education, and family (Buckingham 2000); however, when these influences are pitted against each other, they are still conceptualized as essentially separate. Livingstone (2002) argues that media are becoming so important in young people's everyday lives because they are now an integral part of family, peer, and school contexts. Some have argued that youths' peer relationships affect family interactions (see Dishion et al. 2004), and that parents try to influence peer relationships (see Mounts 2008). To take one example, interpersonal talk and dialogues in different contexts (family, peers, internet, school, and organizations) might influence each other in the process of political socialization (see Eveland, McLeod and Horowitz 1998; McLeod 2000). Thus, the challenge is not only to consider as many of the different contexts of everyday life as possible instead of studying one context at a time, but to develop models of political socialization that explain the interrelations between contexts.

3. Taking the ongoing changes in different contexts seriously

In Western societies, rapid changes are occurring in youth and young adulthood. Education is prolonged. Young adults marry four years later today than they did in 1980. Researchers used to talk about a sharp transition from adolescence to young adulthood, but today they talk about "emerging adulthood" as ages 18 to 25 or older. Because many emerging adults have not yet assumed family and work responsibilities, the period tends to

be characterized by identity exploration, feeling in-between, instability, self-focused enjoyment, and thinking about future possibilities (Arnett 2006), thus allowing for considerable changes in political and civic orientations. Thus, to capture the potentially important life stages, new research on political socialization must cover emerging adulthood and the young-adult years beyond it.

Another change that must be taken seriously is young people's widespread use of new communication technologies. First, in research aimed at explaining differences in political knowledge and participation, media consumption has most often been operationalized as news consumption from papers and television (e.g. Buckingham 1997, 2000; Ensuong 2003, Chaffee and Yang 1990). To understand political socialization, new media formats and the variety of Internet activities must also be considered (Dahlgren 2007, Loader 2007). Second, the new forms of social networks, spheres of public interaction and civic participation, based on new communication technologies mean that researchers have to reconsider what they mean by membership in groups and associations (Wollebaeck and Selle 2003). In short, to understand political socialization today, research must take changes in different contexts seriously and adjust the research designs accordingly.

4. Conceptualizing political participation broadly, not only focussing on formal institutions and narrow electoral aspects

Another challenge to be met in future research is to measure political participation and democratic involvement in broad, ecologically valid ways. Major changes in political participation seem to be taking place; citizen actions are becoming less institutional and more individual, diverse, and unconventional (Barnes, Max and Allerbeck 1979; Dalton, Scarrow and Cain 2004; Inglehart 1977, 1997; Norris 2002). Young people in particular have widened their political repertoires to include 'non-political' arenas such as life styles, recycling routines, Internet activities, consumer habits, and music choices (Bennett 1998, 2000; Dalton 1996, 2000, 2008; Zukin et al. 2006; Hooghe 2004; Norris 2002; O Toole 2003), and these might differ by gender (Hooghe and Stolle 2003; Ekman 2007). One can argue whether the changes mean that youths are now very self-absorbed and uninterested in civic matters (see Milner 2002; Yates and Youniss 1998) or whether their interests are just qualitatively different from those of earlier generations (see Buckingham 2000; Dalton 2008; Dalton, Cain and Scarrow 2004; Livingstone 2002; Loader 2007, Zukin et al. 2006). What is clear, however, is that the limited sets of measures used in most studies cannot capture political involvement as it is broadly defined today. Measures must include elements of community involvement such as memberships in local groups, networks, organisations, and political consumption, voluntary work, donations etcetera. They also must capture skills and commitments citizens may need if they become concerned; a 'civic reserve' (Almond 1987, p. 99). Political socialization must be studied in a broader perspective that includes civic identity development and connects narrow politics with broader civic engagement.

5. Taking a longitudinal perspective

Another challenge for future research is to examine political socialization in a longitudinal perspective, since it refers to processes operating over time. Most stu-

dies are cross sectional or cover only short periods. Consequently, there is a lack of knowledge about the development of political and civic engagement over the entire period of adolescence and emerging adulthood that also could capture entrances into and exits from various modes of engagements during a long period of time. Knowledge is also needed about whether, for example, online engagement has any long-term effects on life-long civic values and behavior among youth (see Gibson et al. 2005; Livingstone and Millwood Hargrave 2006; Montgomery and Gottlieb-Robles 2006). The Media Panel Program established in 1975 by Rosengren and Windahl is a unique large-scale longitudinal study focusing on media and socialization (e g Rosengren 1994; Johnsson-Smaragdi 2001). Unfortunately, though, it was not constructed to address media use and political socialization. Jennings and Niemi's (1981) long-term longitudinal findings on political socialization were groundbreaking and provided valuable knowledge about the generation of youths in the 1960s. New long-term longitudinal studies of political socialization are needed. Thus, a major challenge for research is to include a longitudinal perspective.

6. Focusing on processes and mechanisms rather than correlations

Earlier research showed many correlations between family situations, social class, media consumption, organization membership and different outcome variables. Concerning the family, for instance, many studies have related parents' values or behavior with children's and taken similarities to mean influence (e.g., Jennings and Niemi 1981). Similarly, the links between education and political knowledge have been explained more specifically by

socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity (Oscarsson 2002; Teorell and Westholm 1999; Luskin 1990), but the causal mechanisms through which youths with these different backgrounds and characteristics seek out educational experiences remain to be specified. In short, then, research in different areas and looking at different aspects of political socialization has mainly reported correlations, even though they were sometimes interpreted as evidence for mechanisms such as social influence. The challenge now is to propose and examine mechanisms. To focus more on this is still a key challenge, requiring not only theory development but also longitudinal designs. Studies designed to reveal mechanisms could take the research an important step further.

7. Disentangling general socialization from specific 'civic' experiences when explaining differences in civic engagement

Underlying studies of political socialization is the assumption that experiences specifically dealing with political and civic issues are what matter for the development of political and civic identity and engagement. These factors, however, tend to be studied out of the context of the broader socialization experiences that youths have. Consequently, it is not possible to determine whether the development of the political values and behaviors under study are a consequence of political socialization experiences, or whether they are part of a broader developmental pattern. Results of a recent twin study showed substantial heritability of political attitudes and ideologies (Alford, Funk and Hibbing 2005), thus suggesting that heritable features such as temperament and personality might play a role in the development of political orientations. A study

of the development of civic engagement should, thus, include more fundamental attributes and various personality factors (Lasswell 1951; Welzel 2007). It should also include a focus on the general social identities and norms young people develop by acting in and experiencing different social contexts. Only then can the unique effects of specific political socialization experiences be disentangled from more general development.

8. Developing new theoretical explanations of political socialization

The challenges for empirical work are also relevant for theory. There is a need for theoretical conceptualizations in which the development of civic engagement in youths and young adults is integrated with more general developmental processes, in which youths and young adults are seen as active agents who purposely choose different contexts, developing their civic identities and expressing them in a variety of ways as an inseparable part of their general development (Sapiro 2004). Ideally, new theories would transcend disciplines, drawing out and uniting relevant views. For example, the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism is relevant. In this view, youths are creative agents and innovators in their own socialization, choosing among possible contexts of interaction on the basis of what meaning those contexts have for them (e.g., Blumer 1969, Wallace and Wolf 1995). Developmental psychological explanations of youths, confronted with a variety of opportunity structures, as active agents in choosing socializing contexts can be seen as complementary to this view (e.g., Kerr, Stattin, Biesecker and Ferrer-Wreder 2003). Choices are not limitless, however, and views of how social, economic and cultural inequalities are reproduced in political and organizational

participation should be incorporated (see Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995), as should ideas from different disciplines about cognitive and emotional maturity processes and identity development more generally. In short, new theories of political socialization are needed in which socialization is not about conforming to institutions, norms, and values, but about young people as creative agents in their own socialization process, in which political socialization is part of general developmental processes, and in which school, family, and media are understood as interrelated contexts for development.

Our approach

In this program of research we will attempt to meet these challenges with a series of studies covering youth to adulthood and including design features and measures needed to capture youths as active agents in multiple everyday contexts.

Our unifying research question is: *Through what mechanisms and processes do adolescents and young adults develop their civic engagement?* We will address this question from a theoretical point of view that not only broadens the concept of politics but also takes various adolescent and young adult life contexts into consideration.

In this program we *approach the concept of political involvement broadly.* We use the term civic engagement to encompass knowledge and skills, identity, and various forms of action in political and civic organizations, formal and informal, and communication, discussions and debates in various contexts on for example Internet. In so doing, we aim to capture the range of politically relevant outlets that exist today and the values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills that might underlie reactions to situations such as provocative local decisions,

unfair treatment, and ecological threats, or opportunities to step into new structures of involvement (Mettler and Soss 2004). This approach will allow for both traditional and newer questions about political socialization to be answered. In short, civic engagement includes values and attitudes, competence (knowledge, skills, and political efficacy) as well as behaviour of various degrees of commitment, activism and non-activism in public as well as in private spheres. This idea is present in the concept "Stand-by Citizen" (Amnå 2008; Amnå and Zetterberg, forthcoming; Amnå, submitted).

A second characteristic approach is *the view of youths as active agents who choose their everyday contexts for particular reasons*. Our goal is to discover how these choices are linked to the construction of civic engagement in everyday life. Toward this end, we will assess youths' choices of everyday settings outside of home and school and what implications those choices have for their behaviour.

A third characteristic of our approach will be *sensitivity to ongoing changes in different contexts*. The media and communication technologies make up one example of a changing context. The Internet, for example, has opened up a myriad of new channels for political expression and discussion with likeminded others about civic issues.

Emerging adulthood as a new life phase is another example. In contrast to 10 or 20 years ago, we should expect the civic attitudes and behaviours of people in the early 20s to be quite unsettled. We have designed this study to cover changes in political and civic attitudes and behaviours in adolescence (13 to 17 years), emerging adulthood (18 to 25 years), and early adulthood (26 to 30 years), and to capture

their use of the Internet as a context for civic engagement.

A fourth approach characterizing this program will be *to study political socialization longitudinally in the context of general development*. We will do this by including as many measures as possible in the study we are initiating, and by carrying out the long-term follow-up of a previous study designed to give broad coverage of developmental issues.

A final characteristic of our approach will be *theory development*. We will make sure that the data we collect offer the possibilities for theory development that transcends or bridges disciplines and that is integrated with normal development. Such a theory should include structural factors, individual factors, and social processes in different everyday life contexts.

Structural factors can be family differences in social, economic and cultural resources. Inequalities are reproduced in political and organizational participation through several mechanisms (Verba, Schlozman & Brady 1995). For instance, higher educated and high income people are more likely to participate in voluntary organizations (Verba, Burns & Schlozman 2001). Various culturally, religiously and ethnically embedded values and ways of recruitment may also impact diversely in political socializations processes (see Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001). School's different embedment in socio-economic contexts might also be important (see Almgren 2006). In short, family differences in social, economic and cultural resources must play a role in any theory of political socialization.

Other structural factors are the institutionalized opportunities for instance in local government and various civil society arrangements. If opportunities for political and civic participation do not exist,

then youth cannot participate. Some opportunities are offered through school councils, student board, and classroom climate (Torney-Purta 2000) as well as in civic service, and these differ by school (Almgren 2006). Not only due to the existence of more free or private schools, different schools have different solutions for student involvement. Communities and neighborhoods also differ in the opportunities they offer for youth civic engagement. Voluntary organizations also offer different modes of engagement (Amnå 2006). These differences must be accounted for in a theory of political socialization.

Individual factors and social processes refer firstly to temperament differences. Almost from birth, people differ in: (a) how much they move around rather than being still, (b) how emotionally excitable they are, and (c) how much they like social interaction rather than quiet solitude (e.g., Buss, Plomin, and Willerman 1973). These differences, known as temperament, are quite stable through life. They are not determinate, but they steer some of our choices. It is difficult, for instance, to imagine a person who likes solitude choosing to campaign for a political office. Thus, these temperamental differences may steer youths' choices of activities and experiences that foster civic engagement.

Secondly biological, social, and cognitive maturity processes have to be taken into theoretical consideration. Understanding one's role in the society outside of the people we meet every day requires abstract thinking. Feeling a responsibility for that society requires a mature identity. Thus, civic identity and engagement will necessarily be tied to the more general development of abstract thinking and social maturity that begins with puberty.

Concerning identity development processes, during adolescence, self-views include increasingly more abstract characteristics such as philosophies of life and values. Value orientations (e.g., focus on self versus focus on others) relate to almost every aspect of adolescent life (Stattin and Kerr 2001). Self- versus other-focused value orientations are logically tied to civic identity. Thus, the processes through which value orientations become part of youths' identities will necessarily be part of civic identity development.

In addition, adolescents choose peers who are similar to themselves, but they are also influenced by their peers (Dishion, Patterson and Griesler 1994; Hartup 1996; Kandel 1978, 1986). The possibility that youths' political attitudes and civic engagement are influenced by their peers is largely unexplored, to date. Our study will be designed to capture peer influence, and as such we will be in a unique position to include it in our theory development.

Many have argued that there are gender differences in the development of civic engagement (Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001; Norris 2007). Our theory development will be sensitive to this. In addition, we will strive to make sure our measures capture ways that both boys and girls might express civil and political engagement. Traditionally, political socialization in Sweden has been taken place in fairly homogenous religious or cultural settings. Contemporary socialization processes have to be sensitive to much increased diversity.

Research objectives and questions

The database we develop in this program will allow us as well as collaborating international scholars to address a number of

general and specific questions. Below, we outline some of our major research objectives and give examples of questions to be answered in specific studies.

One objective in our program is to understand *adolescents' and young adults' political and civic engagement and how it changes over time*. Is young people's civic engagement better explained by structural conditions than by their experiences in various everyday life contexts? What kinds of everyday life experiences get youths involved – for shorter or longer period of time – in civic activities, and how do socioeconomic status, cultural background, age and gender come into this? Motivated youths enter organizations, but can we see evidence of socialization effects on civic engagement (apart from self-selection) from joining different organizations? How do people who get involved in political parties and established democratic organizations differ from those engaged in new social movements or those who renounce all modes of collective action? How are people's different perceptions of themselves as adults related to their political and civic identities?

Another objective is to understand *the role of media*. To what extent do differences in young people's patterns of media consumption and online activities predict long term effects on civic engagement? Can we see evidence of socialization effects on civic engagement from joining different internet based communities and activities? To what extent can differences in social background, personality, and temperament explain how young people choose to take part in online activities that have different consequences in terms of public withdrawal vs. public connections? Do different forms of online engagement predict civic engagement in other everyday life contexts? To what extent does

Internet use during adolescence and early adulthood make those disengaged even more disengaged, or have the potential of expanding the group of politically active?

A third objective is to understand *whether and how peers socialize each other's civic engagement*. How often do young people talk about political issues with their friends at different life stages, and can early adolescents, later adolescents, emerging adults, and early adults accurately perceive the political and civic interests of their best friends? Who are the peers of politically and civic interested and uninterested youths – and what activities with peers differentiate these youths? Do friends influence youths' civic engagement or do youths select friends because of it? Is it possible to tease apart the influence of peers in an activity from the influence of the activity in itself?

To understand *how political and civic development relates to more general development constitutes* is a fourth aim of our program. How does the "normal" way young person learn the values, norms and culture of their society affect their specific political and civic development? Does the development of the civic engagement depend on more general individual characteristics – temperament, personality, cognitive ability, and social maturity? How much can young people's political and civic interests be predicted from their more general achievement motivation? To what extent are parents role models specifically for things that have to do with political and civic issues compared with other things: drinking, ways to relate to others, school engagement, etc.?

A fifth research objective is to understand *youth's active roles in the development of their civic engagement*. How do youths' choices of friends, media, and organized activities change their views of themsel-

ves, views of the world, and their political and civic activities? Are political conversations in the family initiated by parents or youths? Do youths choose specific modes of civic engagement to express their basic values? Does civic engagement bolster youths' self-esteem? How much do personality dispositions (internalizing and externalizing) hinder or promote youths becoming engaged in political and civic activities?

Furthermore, our program is deliberatively designed in order to understand *stability and change over time in civic engagement and the roots of adult civic engagement*. Can people identify specific events in their lives that have spurred or changed their civic identities and engagement? How are biological maturity, perceived maturity, and subjective age related to civic identity and engagement in adolescence, and to later features of civic identity and engagement? Do people become more consistent over time in their political and civic behavior across settings, and are there different life trajectories over time for groups of people? Do civic orientations, skills, knowledge and activities develop simultaneously and cumulatively or do they emerge more separately and dialectically over adolescence, emerging adulthood, and early adulthood?

Finally, we are aiming at an understanding of whether *and how experiences in one setting affect changes in other settings and to test numerous specific ideas that integrate contexts*. Do temperament, personality characteristics, and people's values, underlie their choices of activities in different contexts, and do they predict civic identities and engagement? Do negative or positive experiences in one context (family, peer, school) predict youths' choices of other contexts as the context-choice model predicts. Do these experiences predict the development over time of political orien-

tations that are inside or outside of the conventional political and civic system? Do parents' interest, engagement, and values predict youths' civic identities and engagement, and do they change over time in response to youths' initiation of family communication about political or civic matters? Does the democratic functioning of the family affect youths' view of democracy and ways of relating to peers and adults? Do peers have more or less influence on civic interests than parents? Regarding the intervention proposed below, is it possible to change people's civic interests and engagement with a concentrated effort, and can we see consequences in other contexts?

The studies

The program will consist of three components over seven years: An accelerated longitudinal study; an experimental study embedded within the longitudinal design; and an adult follow-up of a previous longitudinal study. In 2015 we will have a database covering ages 10 to 30 that will be unparalleled.

The Accelerated Longitudinal Study

The accelerated six wave longitudinal study will take place in Örebro. It will allow us to collect information from the youths' friends, which is a critical feature of the study. According to official statistics, Örebro is similar to the Swedish average in relevant characteristics like the educational level of the population, income, and rate of unemployment. It has a higher proportion of immigrants, however.

The study will be a cohort-sequential or accelerated longitudinal design involving multiple, overlapping cohorts (Prinzie, Onghena, and Hellinckx 2005). We will

follow each of five age cohorts over six years including totally 12000 individuals. This will allow us to estimate trends over ages, from age 13 to age 30. We will collect data at the schools for the two youngest cohorts and use a postal administration (in some cases a telephone interview) for the three older cohorts. In order to study peer influence in civic engagement, we will also collect the same type of information from two of youths' best friends.

The Experimental Component

The experimental study will be embedded in the longitudinal study. The purposes are to see if experiences can increase civic engagement, regardless of the level of initial interest, and to examine the short- and longer term consequences in different contexts of increased engagement. We will target youths' interest in and knowledge about the European Union with an experimental intervention called Europe Week, inspired by the Model United Nations (see http://www.thimun.org).

Follow-up of "10 To 18"

In 2014, we will collect information on civic engagement from about 1000 24-, 27-, and 30-yr-olds (about 330 at each age) who have been part of the longitudinal study "10 to 18". Earlier data exist for these participants going back to age 10. The aim of 10 to 18 was to test a variety of theoretical ideas about the roles of different contexts in the development of problem behavior, including context-choice theory.

A main reason for complementing the accelerated longitudinal study with the "10 to 18" follow-up, is that the 10 to 18 follow-up will be able to say something more definitive about long-term effects and the links between adult civic engagement and earlier developmental conditions, broadly defined. "10 to 18" is a prospective, longitudinal study about general socialization. It was not developed specifically for understanding political socialization, but the study has a wealth of data on youths everyday behavior in different contexts, and this information extends what exists about general socialization in all longitudinal studies on political socialization that we are aware of. Thus, we should be able to say much about how early socializing experiences will affect youths´ later political and civic identity and engagement.

The "10 to 18" study has a unique design. All pupils between ages 10 and 18 in a whole community were followed over time, and so were their friends at school and friends during leisure. To our knowledge, this is the only study of its kind in the world. Each age cohort consists of approximately 350 participants. This means that data for 3500-4000 youths have been collected every year. The longitudinal data base consists of 5000 participants and 4000 variables assessing behavior in home, school, peer, and free-time contexts.

We will extend the 10 to 18 study by following up three cohorts who participated in multiple waves and have now graduated from high school (gymnasium). We will target the data collection to issues of political and civic attitudes and behaviors in emerging adulthood.

More information about the program concerning publications, activities, participants, international collaborators, courses, etcetera can be found at the homepage of YeS: www.oru.se/research/yes

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