

Youth civic development from the ecological perspective

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Abstract

This habilitation thesis aims to gain novel insights into the area of civic development in adolescence. It covers four main topics nested in the general framework of the ecological approach to human development: (1) how adolescents' civic activity affects their civic beliefs and attitudes, (2) how adolescents' interactions with family and peers reinforce each other to affect civic development, (3) how adolescents' personality traits affect their civic development, and (4) how effects of the broader social context shape civic development in proximal contexts. These topics are translated into more specific research problems focusing on concrete developmental outcomes, social environments, and adolescents' characteristics. A core of the thesis is represented by seven studies containing original empirical research on adolescents' civic development. The studies employ survey-based longitudinal, cross-national, or cross-cohort data from diverse adolescent samples and perform quantitative statistical analyses to test research hypotheses.

Overall, the studies extend the current knowledge by providing concrete illustrations that adolescents are active agents who develop their beliefs and attitudes through their civic engagement and interactions within multiple contexts, such as families, peer groups, schools, or civic associations. The presented research also shows that the interactions within family and peer groups have their irreplaceable roles and form one interconnected system contributing to adolescents' civic development. Next, the studies provide concrete examples of personality traits that young people bring with them into various developmental contexts and that shape both the form and outcomes of civic development. Finally, the studies show that the proximal processes of adolescents' civic development (e.g., the development of civic beliefs through civic engagement) cannot be taken for granted as universal, but they are co-determined by the broader sociocultural context in which civic development takes place. In the concluding section, the thesis draws theoretical and practical implications of the presented findings and suggests directions for future research.

13.2.2019

