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To cite this article: Richard M. Lerner, Sara K. Johnson, Jun Wang, Kaitlyn A. Ferris & Rachel M. Hershberg (2015) The Study of the Development of Civic Engagement Within Contemporary Developmental Science: Theory, Method, and Application, *Research in Human Development*, 12:1-2, 149-156, DOI: [10.1080/15427609.2015.1013759](https://doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2015.1013759)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2015.1013759>



Published online: 02 Apr 2015.



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## COMMENTARY

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# The Study of the Development of Civic Engagement Within Contemporary Developmental Science: Theory, Method, and Application

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and Rachel M. Hershberg

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Within contemporary developmental science, models derived from relational developmental systems metatheory emphasize that the basic process involved in the ontogeny of civic engagement involves mutually-influential and beneficial relations between the developing individual and his or her complex and changing social, cultural, and physical contexts (represented as individual  $\leftarrow \rightarrow$  context relations). The authors suggest that research on the development of civic engagement should be theoretically predicated, use change-sensitive, longitudinal methods, and be comparative across time and place. Using these facets of scholarship as a lens, we discuss the contributions to this special issue. We conclude that the present set of studies provides a useful basis for future research and applications aimed at understanding and promoting individuals' civic contributions, and their support of social organizations promoting individual thriving and freedom, liberty, and social justice.

All animal life is social. No animal is born independent of a member of his or her species (Tobach & Schneirla, 1968) and, at higher psychological levels, organisms prototypically live in ecologies with members of their own and, often, other species (Schneirla, 1957). For humans to survive and, even more, prosper across their life spans, they obviously must live in contexts that provide them with needed resources. Across the course of proto-hominid and hominid evolution, organisms created relatively enduring and more complex social relations—such as pair bonding, hunting and scavenging groups, and tribes (Fisher, 1982a, 1982b)—to enable them to access and retain the resources needed for survival and, even more, for thriving. In turn, these social organizations,

created to support individual survival, required that the members of each organization contributed to its maintenance and perpetuation (Johanson & Edey, 1981). By supporting the social group or structure that supported them, individuals and their social contexts could flourish. In short, across human evolution, bidirectional relationships between individuals and their social groups emerged, including mutually beneficial relations between the person and his or her social context.

Of course, an individual's proclivity to support the context that is supporting him or her is not innate. There is no gene for civic engagement or for positive civic contributions! As a consequence, the challenge for developmental scientists is to understand how civic engagement and contributions develop, how phylogeny is "translated" into ontogeny (Gould, 1977). The basic question here is how, over the course of life, do parents, families, communities, schools, and the broader institutions of a society actualize the potential of humans to become active and positive contributors to their social worlds? This area of inquiry falls under the domain of socialization; across history, developmental scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, and scholars from other fields have studied the processes that link individuals to their social worlds. As a consequence of this history of sustained scholarship, a great deal has been learned about socialization processes and their outcomes (e.g., Bornstein, 2015; Elder, Shanahan, & Jennings, 2015).

Individuals' contributions to their social institutions, and to the maintenance and enhancement of civil society, are vital features of human development in all national settings, but they are perhaps especially vital in democracies embracing ideas of freedom, liberty, and social justice (Lerner, 2004; Lerner, Wang, Champine, Warren, & Erickson, 2014). In such settings, there exists an adaptive social "contract:" Individuals act to support a social world that, in turn, acts to support the individual, qua individual. Because of this link between healthy and positive individual development and the maintenance and perpetuation of a context supporting such development, the bidirectional relations between individual contributions to society, positive civic engagement, and the functioning of social institutions that support individual thriving have become focal areas of theoretical and empirical work within developmental science (Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010).

These bidirectional links between individual and context (represented as individual  $\leftarrow \rightarrow$  context relations) are embedded within the broader ecology of human development. As such, the study of the development of civic engagement is framed with increasing frequency by ideas associated with relational developmental systems (RDS) metatheory (Lerner et al., 2014; Overton, 2015). RDS metatheory consists of a set of ideas about theory construction that are derived from a process-relational paradigm (Overton, 2015). Overton (2015) explained that, as compared to a Cartesian world view, the process-relational paradigm focuses on (1) process (systematic changes in the developmental system); (2) becoming (moving from potential to actuality; a developmental process as having a past, present, and future; Whitehead, 1929/1978); (3) holism (the meanings of entities and events derive from the context in which they are embedded); (4) relational analysis (assessment of the mutually-influential relations within the developmental system); and, (5) the use of multiple perspectives and explanatory forms (employment of ideas from multiple theory-based models of change within, and of, the developmental system). Within the process-relational paradigm, the organism is seen as inherently active, self-creating (autopoietic), self-organizing, self-regulating (agentic), nonlinear/complex, and adaptive (Overton, 2015).

In turn, within the RDS metatheory, the conceptual emphasis is placed on mutually-influential relations between individuals and contexts, specifically individual  $\leftarrow \rightarrow$  context relations. These relations may vary across place (social institutional or national setting) and (individual, family, or

generational/historical) time (Elder et al., 2015); the “arrow of time,” or temporality, represents history, which is the broadest level within the ecology of human development. History imbues all other levels with change. Such change may be stochastic (e.g., non-normative life or historical events; Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006) or systematic. The potential for systematic change constitutes a potential for (at least relative) plasticity across the life span (Lerner, 1984, 2012). Theories derived from an RDS metatheory focus on the “rules” or processes that govern, or regulate, exchanges between (the functioning of) individuals and their contexts. Brandtstädter (1998) termed these relations “developmental regulations” and noted that, when developmental regulations involve mutually-beneficial individual  $\leftarrow \rightarrow$  context relations, these developmental regulations are adaptive.

Moreover, because history (or temporality) imbues in individual  $\leftarrow \rightarrow$  context relations the potential for relative plasticity in human development, developmental scientists may be optimistic that instances of these relations may be found or created to promote more positive human development among all people, and to promote social justice by providing opportunities for all individuals to optimize their chances for positive, healthy development (Lerner & Overton, 2008). Instantiation of such promotion and optimization efforts rests on the conduct of research using change-sensitive methodologies (e.g., longitudinal designs, and change-sensitive measures and data analytic techniques; Molenaar & Nesselroade, 2015; von Eye, Bergman, & Hsieh, 2015), and the translation of the results of such developmental research into policies and programs.

There are several models associated with RDS-based ideas that have been used to study processes pertinent to, or explicitly about, the development of civic engagement (e.g., see Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015; Sherrod et al., 2010; Zaff, Hart, Flanagan, Youniss, & Levine, 2010). Examples include Benson’s model of individual and ecological developmental assets (Benson, Scales, & Syversten, 2011), Damon’s (2008) conceptions of youth purpose, Spencer’s (2006) phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory, Lerner and Lerner’s model of adaptive developmental regulations, which encompasses positive youth development (PYD) and youth contribution (e.g., Lerner, 2004; Lerner et al., 2014), and Zaff’s (Zaff et al., 2011) concept of active and engaged citizenship. All of these models are useful in elucidating the individual  $\leftarrow \rightarrow$  context relations that are involved in, antecedent to, and consequences of civic engagement.

The presence of this array of RDS-based models illustrates the use of the metamodel in generating testable sets of ideas about the ontogeny of civic engagement and its role in positive human development. In addition, the presence of these models underscores the importance of theory per se in understanding the character of civic engagement. Moreover, the embeddedness of these models within the relational developmental system requires that theory-predicated tests of the development of civic engagement involve longitudinal research that is sensitive to time (Elder et al., 2015). Furthermore, to elucidate the bases and implications of variation in the individual  $\leftarrow \rightarrow$  context relations, scholarship about the development of civic engagement should be sensitive to place, that is, it should be comparative, across time/historical eras and national settings (Elder et al., 2015).

In short, to understand and, eventually enhance, the individual  $\leftarrow \rightarrow$  context relations involved in the development of civic engagement, developmental science research should be theoretically predicated, longitudinal, and comparative. Framed by these RDS-based requirements for research, we now discuss the substance and contributions of the articles in this special issue.

## AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

Despite variation across the articles in theoretical underpinnings, the use of change-sensitive methodologies, or the presence of a comparative approach to understanding the development of civic engagement, all of the studies in this special issue make important contributions to advancing understanding of civic engagement. For instance, the research by Wray-Lake et al. (this issue) provides comparative information, as well as an elucidation of the bidirectional relations between individual and context, that are of focal concern in RDS-based models. The authors examined potential associations between the civic commitments of immigrant youth and ecological resources in their environments. In fact, using RDS-based ideas as a frame, the authors used mediation and moderation models to appraise civic engagement among different ethnic groups of immigrant youth in the United States. Consistent with past research about the immigrant paradox (Garcia Coll & Marks, 2012), Wray-Lake et al. reported that, for all positive outcomes except for English proficiency, first-generation youth fared better than second-generation youth across ethnic groups, which suggests that for Black, Latino, and Asian immigrants to the United States, the nature of their assimilation experiences may lead to adverse outcomes.

The research by Kim et al. (this issue) also exemplifies the comparative approach to civic engagement research for which we have called. Their study involved adolescents from Australia, the United States, Bulgaria, and Hungary who were studied in the mid-1990s, when Bulgaria and Hungary were making the transition to democratic societies. Their data support that idea that the nature of civic engagement among youth varies in relation to the history and status of the sociopolitical context as it exists at specific historical times.

In turn, Ballard et al. (this issue) provide comparative information about the motivations for becoming civically engaged among ethnic minority youth within the United States (in this case, Latino and Asian youth). They report that, for both ethnic groups, civic participation is seen as an avenue for future career and skill development. Based on these findings, the authors propose ideas for applications to enhance civic engagement among these young people. They suggest that, to increase ethnic minority and immigrant youth motivations for civic participation, such opportunities must resonate with the personal experiences and passions of the youth and, as well, must capitalize on the young people's emotional responses and belief systems.

Eckstein et al. (this issue) also used a cross-national, comparative approach, framed by RDS-based ideas, to examine differences in levels of involvement in and predictors of civic engagement among immigrant and nonimmigrant majority youth in Belgium, Germany, and Turkey. As in the Kim et al. article (this issue), the authors found that predictors of civic engagement differed in relation to participants' ethnic background. For instance, social networks provide ethnic minority youth with opportunities for civic engagement that are traditionally not afforded to them based on their group status in a new country. Moreover, consistent with the fundamental social nature of the human developmental process in general and, of course, the civic engagement developmental process in particular, the authors report that social aspects of civic participation (e.g., social networks) may be especially important for the civic engagement of immigrant youth.

Suárez-Orozco and colleagues' work (this issue) makes substantive and methodological contributions. Their study highlights how Latino immigrant children are becoming civically engaged through playing a part in the youth organizing and activism efforts that have emerged in response to heightened discrimination that citizen and non-citizen Latino youth experience in the United

States. In turn, this article is an excellent example of the use of qualitative methods to explore ideographic and, as well, group-specific patterns of civic engagement among youth.

Chen and Morrow-Howell (this issue) took a life course perspective in their study of the motivations to volunteer among older adults (age 50–93 years). Despite the resources and willingness older adults have to contribute to the society, not much research has been done to understand the factors influencing the volunteering experiences of this population, as well as the associated outcomes. Through a community service program (the Experience Corps Program), this study identified four types of motivations among older volunteers (33% reported altruistic motives, 36% reported a mixture of altruistic and self-oriented motives, 16% reported self-oriented motives, and 15% reported practical motives), and noted that motivation varied in relation to gender and race, but not in relation to the receipt of a stipend or volunteer history. Race, education, receipt of a stipend, and prior volunteering history were differentially related to the frequency, duration, and perceived benefit of volunteering among older volunteers.

Taking a life-span approach to studying the individual and contextual predictors of civic engagement among German adults aged 18 to 75 years, Pavlova et al. (this issue) assessed breadth and depth of civic involvement. Their findings pointed to life-span general and to the age- (or cohort-) specific barriers to, and facilitators of, civic participation. In addition, the authors found that the kinds of civic participation that are valued and available were context specific.

Kruse and Schmitt's work (this issue) is also framed by several RDS-based ideas. For instance, the authors pointed to the presence across the life span of plasticity, especially among the young-old and old-old. However, Kruse and Schmitt's results also highlight the need for changes in measurement of civic engagement across the life span, as the activities that are developmentally appropriate for young-old and old-old adults may differ in many ways from civic acts carried out by individuals in other parts of the life span. More generally, their findings pointed to the role of "opportunity structures" (or constraints and opportunities present within an individual's life context) in maintaining or diminishing civic engagement among the old-old.

In sum, across the articles in this special issue, we find several examples of how ideas from RDS metatheory are being used to investigate variation in and development of civic engagement. We also found evidence of rich, comparative analyses across time and place within this set of studies. On the other hand, greater attention to the use of change-sensitive methods (designs, measures, and analyses) would have enhanced many of the contributions made by the work reported in this special issue. This observation leads us to our final comments.

## CONCLUSIONS

The research reported in this special issue provides examples of how and why it is important to embed the study of the development of civic engagement in assessments of the role of time and place (Elder et al., 2015). Indeed, the articles in this special issue illustrate well the challenge of conducting research on civic engagement in countries that are very different from each other in their political systems and beliefs about what civil society should look like; at the least, such variation makes it difficult to measure civic contributions in comparable ways. Moreover, as a set, the articles offer ideas for how the individual  $\leftarrow$   $\rightarrow$  context relations involved in civic engagement might vary in relation to age-related variables, as well as in relation to historically-related temporal variation and national context. Of course, longitudinal research that is coupled with

assessments possessing measurement invariance across individual and contextual variables will be needed to test the ideas raised in the articles in this special issue.

Nevertheless, we recognize that the study of the development of civic engagement is still a relatively young scholarly field (Sherrod et al., 2010), and that only preliminary, cross-sectional work may be available. Nevertheless, despite the limitations of such designs for studying intraindividual change and interindividual differences in intraindividual change, the results of cross-sectional studies may provide an impetus for later longitudinal research. We believe the set of articles in this special issue makes this contribution.

In addition, we believe that the contributions made to this special issue underscore the theoretical orientations and interests of contemporary cohorts of developmental scientists and, as well, aspirations among developmental scientists to produce scholarship that can be applied to real-world settings. Such research may provide the bases for evidence-based means to address the challenges to freedom, liberty, and democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Finally, we believe that the future of scholarship about the development of civic engagement will be judged not only by its theoretical bases and its rigor in developmental methods, but also on whether the developmental science tools that are used accurately reflect the diversity and dynamism of human development and are centered on promoting thriving and positive civic engagement across the life span. Promoting such features of human life may be the most significant lens through which the contributions of developmental science will be viewed.

## FUNDING

The preparation of this article was supported in part by grants from the John Templeton Foundation.

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