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A Cross-Cultural Examination of Adolescent Civic Engagement: Comparing Italian and American Community-Oriented and Political Involvement

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The purpose of this study was to investigate community-oriented and political civic engagement activities and intentions among youth in Italy and the United States. Adolescents (N = 566) from academically rigorous schools in both countries completed surveys assessing frequency of civic activity participation, motivation for activity, evaluations of activity, and intentions for future civic engagement. Results suggest that youth in both countries were more likely to participate in community-oriented than political civic activities and that youth in both countries found their civic experiences to be meaningful. American youth reported more past civic activities of both types and higher intentions for future community-oriented civic engagement compared to Italian youth. Finally, a model was tested to examine links between peer and school contexts and civic activities and intentions. Findings highlighted that, in both countries, peer and school contexts had a stronger impact on community-oriented than on political civic activity.

KEYWORDS *adolescents, civic engagement, cross-cultural study, peer values, school climate*

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Disconcerting recent trends suggest that youth in several democratic countries around the world are increasingly disengaged from society, especially from politics (Esser & de Vreese, 2007). Civic engagement, or participation in community-oriented and political activities, is important for individual development and vital for the future of democratic societies. Adolescence is a time of identity exploration and formation and an important time for the development of civic beliefs and commitments (e.g., Flanagan, 2009). Adolescents potentially form feelings of connectedness to and responsibility for others in their community and society; this reflects and promotes positive development and contributes to evolving sense of citizenship (e.g., Yates & Youniss, 1999). Participating in civic activities during adolescence is believed to facilitate this process; civic involvement has been linked with positive outcomes such as self-efficacy (e.g., Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar 2007), positive identity orientation (e.g., Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999), and civic knowledge and skills (e.g., Niemi, Hepburn, & Chapman, 2000). Some studies suggest that certain civic activities during adolescence influence future civic participation (e.g., Obradovic & Masten, 2007). Yet, youth motivations for and experiences in civic activities are not well understood.

YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ACROSS CULTURES—ITALY AND THE UNITED STATES

More research is needed to investigate youth civic engagement across cultures to understand how youth civic experiences vary, or are similar, in different social and political systems. Two countries that will be used for a comparative analysis of youth civic engagement in the present study are Italy and the United States. These countries are stable Western democracies and have some similar characteristics when it comes to youth civic involvement: for example, coupled trends of increasing volunteerism with decreasing political engagement (Lopez et al., 2006; Marta & Pozzi, 2007; Marta & Scabini, 2003); involvement in various social movements and protests in recent decades (McAdam, 1988; Morlino et al., 2000); and a generalized distrust of politicians and government (Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, & Zukin, 2002; Cartocci, 2002; Lopez et. al, 2006). Despite the similarities, these countries have somewhat different political systems; for example, the Italian government provides a greater number of social services than does the American government. Investigating the state of youth civic engagement among youth in two countries that share basic political characteristics yet differ in important ways, can contribute to understanding societal influences on youth civic development. This information can be used to develop interventions aimed at facilitating such activities. The current study does just such an investigation among Italian and American adolescents attending rigorous college preparatory high schools. Youth attending these schools are more

likely than others to come from families and neighborhoods with resources to enhance civic opportunities and to offer better preparation for political participation (Argentin, 2007; Atkins & Hart, 2003).

DOMAINS AND CONTEXTS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Two types of civic engagement have emerged as distinct and important: community-oriented engagement such as volunteering, and political engagement such as affiliation with political parties (Obradovic & Masten, 2007; Walker, 2000). Italian youth today evidence widespread political apathy and even disgust towards formal politics (e.g., De Luca, 2007), yet youth volunteerism is increasing (Marta & Pozzi, 2007). Research in the United States suggests similar trends of political disengagement and apathy (Andolina et al., 2002; Neimi, Hepburn, & Chapman, 2000) with high rates of youth volunteerism (e.g., Walker, 2000). This study extends current knowledge about youth civic involvement in these domains in each country.

We examine how peer values and school context relate to civic engagement in each context. Peer support and school contexts have an impact on youth civic development (e.g., Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, & Gallay, 2007; Youniss, McLellan, & Mazer, 2001). School and peer contexts may serve as mediating institutions (Flanagan, 2003) that structure opportunities (Kahne & Sporte, 2008) and transmit cultural values in ways that influence civic engagement. These contexts provide proximate civic influences (compared to the more distal influence of government or culture) through which youth develop civic attitudes and intentions (Flanagan et al., 2007). The political system in the United States encourages individual civic participation and this message is often promoted to youth, and civic activities facilitated, in school contexts. The Italian political system has more expansive social programs, reflecting a belief in collective civic commitment and perhaps creating a less salient emphasis on, and thus fewer opportunities for, individual civic involvement in schools. In addition to providing different opportunities, schools in these countries may differ on democratic climate, which is suggested to facilitate civic engagement (Flanagan et al., 2007). Peer context might also relate to civic participation differently in these countries. In the United States, students who are part of peer groups valuing school-endorsed activities are more likely to be civically engaged than those in peer groups valuing non-school activities (see Youniss, McLellan, & Mazer, 2001). It is not clear how various peer values relate to civic activity in Italy. Comparing how contexts relate to youth civic engagement is especially useful for designing programs to facilitate civic development.

On the basis of these considerations, we compare community-oriented and political civic activity, motivations, evaluations, and intentions by nationality (Italian vs. American adolescents) and gender. Finally, we

examine whether peer values (civic and leisure) and school democratic climate relate to past community-oriented or political civic involvement and to intentions for participation in future community-oriented and political civic activities.

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

Participants were 566 adolescents (48.2% males and 51.8% females) aged 14–19 years ($M = 16$ years; $SD = 1.29$): 311 adolescents were Italian (from three schools); 255 adolescents were American (from one school). The gender ($\chi^2(2, 566) = 2.86$, ns) and age ($F(1, 566) = 0.89$, ns) composition was similar across country. Youth in both countries attended academically rigorous high schools that prepare students for university education (classical or scientific lyceums in Italy and a private high school in America).

We obtained permission from school principals to administer questionnaires. Parents received letters describing the study; students whose parents did not object to their participation received assent forms. In Italy, data were collected in classrooms in February 2009; all students present agreed to participate. In America, students who agreed to participate completed an online survey over the course of two days in February of 2008.

Measures

The questionnaire included: (a) sociodemographic questions; (b) questions about community-oriented and political civic involvement and intentions; (c) questions about peer values and school climate. The questionnaire included measures originally developed in English. Measures were translated from English to Italian by two psychologists; the two translators discussed and resolved discrepancies.

COMMUNITY-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES AND ATTITUDES

Past volunteering was assessed with one item asking how often participants had done volunteer work in the community over the past nine months (1 = *never*, 2 = *1 to 3 times*, 3 = *4 or more times*). Motivations for volunteering were measured by asking “How important are the following reasons to you in deciding whether or not to volunteer or do service work” followed by seven items created for this study (1 = *not at all important* to 5 = *very important*). Two items assessed helping others as a reason for service (e.g., “. . . whether I feel I will be helping people less fortunate than myself”) and five items measured *external reasons for service* (e.g., “. . . whether I’m getting recognized for my volunteer work”). Cronbach’s alphas were .66

and .74 for the former, and .66 and .74 for the latter in the Italian and American samples, respectively. Intentions for future volunteering were measured with two statements adapted from previous work (Reinders & Youniss, 2006) assessing the likelihood of volunteering in the future (“How likely is it that you will volunteer in the upcoming summer?” and “. . . after graduating from high school?”; 1 = *not at all likely* to 5 = *definitely will*). Cronbach’s alphas were .78 and .77 in the Italian and American samples, respectively. Youth who had been involved in volunteer activities were asked to evaluate their experience via responses to 10 items (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Items were created for this study and grouped into two categories: meaningful volunteering (seven items; e.g., “I felt that my volunteer work was meaningful”) and opportunity to reflect on volunteering (three items; e.g., “I had opportunities to talk to others during or after volunteering about the service experiences”). Cronbach’s alphas were .90 and .71 for meaningful volunteering, and .70 and .73 for reflection in Italy and America, respectively.

POLITICAL ACTIVITIES AND ATTITUDES

Past political involvement was measured with one item asking how often over the last nine months participants had “joined or participated in a political party, club, or organization?” (1 = *never*, 2 = *1 to 3 times*, 3 = *4 or more times*). To measure intentions for future political involvement, participants rated the likelihood of boycotting a product, demonstrating for a cause, and working on a political campaign after graduating high school (1 = *not at all likely* to 5 = *definitely will*; Metz, McLellan, & Youniss, 2003). Cronbach’s alphas were .59 and .60 in Italy and America, respectively. To assess intentions to vote, participants rated their likelihood of voting in the next election in which they were eligible (1 = *not at all likely* to 5 = *definitely will*; Metz et al., 2003).

PEER AND SCHOOL CONTEXTS

Peer values were measured using seven items (scaled from 1 = *not at all important* to 5 = *very important*) adapted from Youniss, McLellan, and Mazer (2001). The items grouped into two factors: school/civic values (four items; e.g., importance of “studying” or “doing volunteer or service work” to friends) and peer leisure values (three items; e.g., importance “partying” to friends). Cronbach’s alphas were .63 and .75 for school/civic values and .70 and .65 for peer leisure values in Italy and America, respectively. To assess school democratic climate, six items (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) were adapted from Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, and Sheblanova (1998). A sample item is “At my school, different points of view are accepted.” Cronbach alphas were .77 and .81 in Italy and America, respectively.

RESULTS

Involvement in Community-Oriented Civic Activities

To examine nationality (Italian vs. American) and gender differences in civic involvement, we compared volunteer involvement in the last nine months. Volunteer involvement was higher among American than Italian adolescents ($\chi^2_{(2, 566)} = 237.90, p < .001$; Cramer's $V = .65$): 62.4% of American versus 11.6% of Italian youth had participated in volunteer activities more than four times; 29% of American versus 18% of Italian youth had participated one to three times; and 8.6% of American versus 70.04% of Italian youth had never participated. Involvement in volunteerism was not related to gender in the American sample ($\chi^2_{(2, 255)} = 4.10, ns$; Cramer's $V = .13$), whereas in the Italian sample gender differences were close to significance ($\chi^2_{(2, 311)} = 5.95, p = .051$; Cramer's $V = .14$), with females being more involved in volunteer activities than were males.

To compare intentions for future volunteerism by nationality and gender we conducted an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with a four-level independent variable (Italian males vs. Italian females vs. American males vs. American females). Tukey post-hoc comparisons were used to examine differences between these four groups. Findings (see Table 1) indicate significant differences with American females reporting the highest level of intentions, followed by American males, Italian females, and finally Italian males.

To examine differences in motives for volunteering, a similar ANOVA was conducted, revealing that the four groups scored similarly on prosocial motives of choice to volunteer (see Table 1): All youth agreed that the most important motive for volunteering was the desire to help other people. External motives were less crucial to all youth; however, American males scored significantly higher on external motives than any other group.

The ANOVA to examine differences in evaluation of volunteer activities, indicated that youth of both countries and genders considered their volunteer experiences equally meaningful and that they had equal opportunity for reflection on their experiences.

Involvement in Political Civic Activities

To examine political involvement by nationality and gender, we compared past involvement in political activities in the past nine months. Such activity was higher among American than Italian youth ($\chi^2_{(2, 566)} = 79.38, p < .001$; Cramer's $V = .37$): 20.8% of the American versus 8% of Italian participants had participated in activities of political groups or organizations more than four times; 38.8% of American versus 14.8% of Italian participants had participated one to three times; and 40.4% of American versus 77.2% of Italian

TABLE 1 Means (and Standard Deviations) of Volunteer and Political Civic Engagement Dimensions

| | Italian adolescents | | American adolescents | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| | Males <i>n</i> = 140 | Females <i>n</i> = 171 | Males <i>n</i> = 133 | Females <i>n</i> = 122 | |
| Future volunteer involvement | 2.10 ^d (0.88) | 2.53 ^c (0.96) | 3.41 ^b (1.23) | 4.01 ^a (1.04) | $F(3, 565) = 93.55$ $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .33$ |
| Motives for volunteering | | | | | |
| Prosocial | 3.45 ^a (0.84) | 3.59 ^a (0.88) | 3.59 ^a (0.84) | 3.72 ^a (0.89) | $F(3, 565) = 2$, <i>ns</i> , $\eta^2 = .03$ |
| External | 2.67 ^b (0.71) | 2.59 ^b (0.69) | 2.93 ^a (0.62) | 2.64 ^b (0.78) | $F(3, 565) = 5.24$ $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$ |
| Evaluation of volunteering | | | | | |
| Meaningful | 3.71 ^a (0.88) | 3.93 ^a (0.78) | 3.73 ^a (0.62) | 3.81 ^a (0.49) | $F(3, 215) = 1.06$, <i>ns</i> , $\eta^2 = .01$ |
| Reflectron | 3.33 ^a (0.89) | 3.30 ^a (0.81) | 3.51 ^a (0.93) | 3.44 ^a (0.81) | $F(3, 215) = 0.62$, <i>ns</i> , $\eta^2 = .01$ |
| Future political involvement | 2.52 ^a (0.93) | 2.15 ^b (0.79) | 2.20 ^b (0.91) | 2.36 ^{ab} (0.97) | $F(3, 565) = 5.13$ $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .03$ |
| Future voting | 4.56 ^{ab} (0.86) | 4.53 ^{ab} (0.91) | 4.45 ^b (1.06) | 4.80 ^a (0.64) | $F(3, 565) = 3.64$ $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$ |

Note. A cluster mean is significantly different from another mean at $p < .05$ if they have different superscripts.

participants had never participated. Political involvement was not related to gender in either the Italian ($\chi^2_{(2, 255)} = 2.55$, *ns*; Cramer's $V = .09$) or the American ($\chi^2_{(2, 255)} = 0.81$, *ns*; Cramer's $V = .03$) samples. Overall, the rate of involvement in political participation was lower than the rate of involvement in volunteer activities ($t_{(565)} = 10.07$, $p < .001$).

ANOVAs were used to compare males and females in both countries on intentions for future political involvement and voting. Significant differences emerged on both variables (see Table 1). Italian males reported higher intentions for future political involvement than did American males and Italian females, whereas American females did not differ significantly from any other group. American females also reported significantly higher intentions to vote than did American males, whereas Italian males and females reported intermediate intentions, not significantly different from American youth.

Associations Between Peer and School Characteristics and Civic Activities

To test the links between peer values and school climate on the one hand and civic engagement on the other, we used structural equation modeling (SEM). We tested a model in which peer values (i.e., school/civic values, leisure values) and democratic school climate predicted future volunteer involvement both directly and indirectly, through the mediator of past volunteer involvement. Additionally, peer values and school climate predicted future political involvement and voting both directly and indirectly through past political involvement. Gender and age were included and allowed to predict all other variables. The model also estimated correlations between predictors (i.e., peer values and school climate), between past volunteer and political engagement, and between future volunteer, political engagement, and voting. Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables included in the model are presented in Table 2. The model was tested via the AMOS (Arbuckle, 2003) structural equation modeling program, using the maximum likelihood estimation. Various indices (χ^2 , *df*; GFI; CFI; SRMR) were used to evaluate model fit (Byrne, 2001).

Model fit was first examined in the overall sample. The hypothesized model fit the data very well ($\chi^2 = 15.04$, $df = 4$; SRMR = .02; GFI = .99; CFI = .98). Significant paths are in Figure 1. Peer school/civic values and democratic school climate were positively linked to both past and intended community-oriented volunteer activities; peer leisure values were negatively associated with future volunteerism; and peer school/civic values were positively associated with past political involvement. Past volunteer and political involvement were positively linked to future volunteer and political engagement, respectively. Additionally, gender (dummy coded: 0 = males, 1 = females) was negatively linked to peer leisure values and positively linked with future volunteer involvement; age was negatively related to peer

TABLE 2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Variables Included in the SEM Model

| | Means (SD) | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. |
|---------------------------------|---------------|---------|--------|---------|--------|------|--------|---------|----|
| 1. Past volunteer involvement | 1.26 (1.32) | 1 | | | | | | | |
| 2. Past political involvement | 0.67 (1.02) | .30*** | 1 | | | | | | |
| 3. Future volunteer involvement | 2.95 (1.26) | .59*** | .24*** | 1 | | | | | |
| 4. Future political involvement | 2.41 (0.98) | .16*** | .25*** | .28*** | 1 | | | | |
| 5. Future voting | 4.57 (0.89) | .16*** | .05 | .10* | .21*** | 1 | | | |
| 6. Democratic school climate | 3.34 (0.76) | .27*** | .13*** | .31*** | -.02 | .05 | 1 | | |
| 7. Peer school/civic values | 3.11 (0.74) | .33*** | .24*** | .35*** | .09* | .08 | .32*** | 1 | |
| 8. Peer leisure values | 3.27 (0.77) | -.19*** | -.10* | -.27*** | -.02 | -.03 | -.11** | -.24*** | 1 |

Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

leisure values and democratic school climate, whereas it was positively linked to past volunteer involvement and to future voting. Finally, all the covariances between the variables were significant, except for the link between future volunteer and future voting. The model explained a high percentage of variance in past and future volunteer involvement (19% and 42%, respectively), whereas it explained a low percentage of variance in past political involvement (9%), future political involvement (5%), and voting (2%).

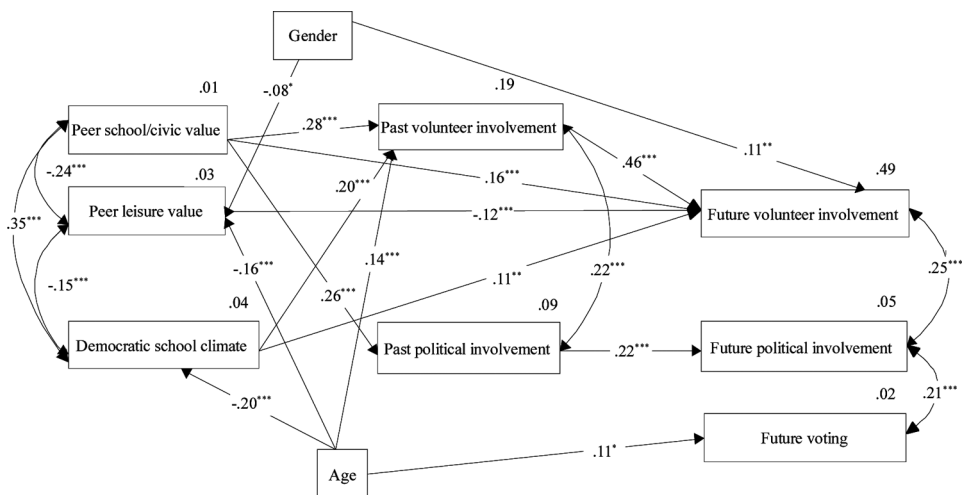


FIGURE 1 Standardized solution of the model tested in the overall sample ($N=566$). *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

The model fit well in both the Italian ($\chi^2 = 9.56$, $df = 4$; SRMR = .02; GFI = .99; CFI = .98) and the American ($\chi^2 = 29.02$, $df = 4$; SRMR = .05; GFI = .98; CFI = .97) samples.

We performed multi-group analyses to test whether the model applied equally well to both groups. The fixed model (in which all parameters were fixed to be equal between the two national samples) was compared to a number of models (in each model only one parameter was let to be free, making it possible to ascertain which parameters were statistically different in the two national groups). Findings indicated that four paths were statistically different in the two samples: (a) the path from age to peer leisure values ($\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} = 11.93$, $p < .001$) was significant only in the Italian sample ($-.26$, $p < .001$); (b) the path from age to democratic school climate ($\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} = 9.08$, $p < .01$) was significant only in the Italian sample ($-.33$, $p < .001$); (c) the path from peer school/civic values to future voting ($\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} = 7.43$, $p < .01$) was significant only in the American sample ($.16$, $p < .01$); and (d) the path from past political involvement to future political involvement, although significant in both the Italian ($.33$, $p < .001$) and the American ($.15$, $p < .05$) samples, was stronger in the Italian one.

DISCUSSION

This article investigated experiences, intentions, and contexts of civic participation among youth attending academically rigorous schools in Italy and the United States. Overall, results indicate similarities between the youth in Italy and the United States: youth were more likely to be involved in community-oriented civic activities than political civic activities, and associations of civic engagement with both peer values and school climate were similar for youth across countries. These results support past research suggesting that youth favor activities such as volunteering over political civic engagement (e.g., De Luca, 2007; Marta & Pozzi, 2007; Walker, 2000). Yet, results from this study extend past research findings by providing a more nuanced picture of similarities and some differences between American and Italian youth civic engagement. We organize discussion of our findings in terms of community-oriented and political civic activities.

Youth Community-Oriented Civic Involvement

Youth in the United States were more inclined toward community-oriented civic involvement, in the form of volunteerism, compared to Italian youth. Perhaps this reflects that there are more volunteer opportunities for young people in the United States, or a stronger general emphasis on volunteerism. Although neither school in this sample required voluntary service, the school in the United States values service as part of their school mission statement

whereas the Italian school does not. Structural differences such as this likely affect the number of opportunities for service as well as the messages that students receive through “mediating institutions” (Flanagan, 2003) such as schools, about the importance of seeking out such opportunities. There might also be logistic differences facilitating youth volunteerism in the United States that are not present in Italy such as ease of transportation for youth in suburban schools in the United States. Efforts to promote youth civic engagement in the United States often focus on schools as a vehicle to facilitate youth civic engagement (e.g., Youniss & Levine, 2009) and many schools in the United States offer opportunities for community service participation (Niemi, Hepburn, & Chapman, 2000). In contrast, the school system in Italy focuses on high academic standards without as much emphasis on prioritizing extracurricular involvement (Grassi, 2007).

That American youth in our sample were more inclined toward volunteering than were Italian youth might also reflect a difference in cultural values placed on individual helping behavior. The individualism and ethic of general personal responsibility in the United States might lead American youth to feel a sense of personal social responsibility to volunteer where they see problems in their community. The nature of the Italian social welfare system might lead Italian youth to value communal social programs as an effective way to solve social problems rather than emphasizing an individual’s responsibility to volunteer.

Despite differences in the academic systems and cultural contexts, the participants who had some past volunteer experiences were very similar across countries. Youth in both countries were more likely to endorse prosocial than external motives for volunteering, indicating that youth across cultures—despite different cultural messages about volunteerism—are motivated to help others and inclined to be concerned with social issues. However, male American participants were slightly more likely to endorse external reasons for doing service than were youth in Italy. This difference, although small in size, might reflect an emphasis in the American school on personal gains from volunteerism such as recognition, rewards, or building stronger college applications (e.g., Andolina et al., 2002). Still, youth who volunteered in both countries reported that their service experiences were equally meaningful and that they had equal chances to reflect on and evaluate their activity. Taken together, these results suggest that youth in both countries are intrinsically motivated to help others and that when they participate they find volunteering to be a meaningful endeavor.

The findings also indicate that peer values and school climate are related to recent and intended community-oriented civic activity for youth in both countries. Among youth from both countries, having friends who value school and civic behavior predicts more of such activity whereas having friends with leisure values predicts less. These results support past findings that peer group orientation relates to civic participation in American youth

(e.g., Youniss et al., 2001) and extends the findings to a sample of Italian youth. Moreover, perceiving a democratic school climate also predicted more community-oriented civic engagement in both countries, supporting other claims that school contexts influence youth volunteer activities and intentions (Flanagan et al., 1998, 2007).

Taken together, the pattern of results implies that peer values and a democratic school climate might be able to foster community-oriented civic commitments. Implementing peer-driven civic education programs and activities might increase the chances of youth volunteerism. Schools can also work to foster a democratic school climate, in which adolescents feel attached to and feel like valued members of their community, in order to facilitate volunteerism.

Youth Political Civic Activities

Political civic activity and intentions were lower for youth in both countries than were community-oriented civic activity and intentions. This confirms past literature noting that youth are participating less in traditional politics while remaining involved (and even increasing involvement) in volunteering. Still, youth in the United States reported more political activity than did youth in Italy. This might reflect more structured opportunities for large numbers of American youth to have civic experiences (both volunteering and political).

School and peer contexts were less strongly related to political (vs. community-oriented) civic experiences and intentions. Perhaps volunteering is more amenable to the encouragement and provision of opportunities that peers and school staff can provide. Political involvement in both countries might be more divisive and therefore less easily encouraged across political lines, and more influenced by family history or personal factors.

Our results also suggest that gender might be related to political, but not community-oriented, civic aspirations differently for youth in Italy and the United States. Unexpectedly, our results indicated that Italian males were more likely to aspire to political involvement than American males whereas American females were more likely to intend to vote in the future than any other group. These findings need to be further investigated in future studies.

We were less successful at predicting political civic engagement than we were community-oriented engagement in the present study. More research is needed to address why patterns of political engagement are different from community-oriented engagement and to help illuminate processes specific to youth political development that could be relevant to interventions. Perhaps a very concerted effort is needed in both countries to involve youth politically. Schools or community organizations might invite youth to be a part of political processes, and youth could learn and practice political knowledge and skills through projects and debates (e.g., Youniss & Levine,

2009). Also, given that youth in both countries are involved in volunteer activities, adults could use volunteer experiences as opportunities to discuss the political context of social issues. Connecting volunteerism to political processes might lead youth to feel less alienated from politics.

Limitations and Future Directions

A limitation of this study is that the youth examined are more likely to be civically involved than the general population of youth in both countries. Although it is important to understand civic engagement among this group, it is critical also to understand youth from a wider variety of backgrounds, including those who likely have fewer opportunities for civic involvement (e.g., Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). As with all cross-cultural research, these findings might be idiosyncratic to the samples studied and conclusions might not be generalizable. This study also relied on self report data so it is worth considering that, for example, reports of prosocial motivations for volunteerism might be inflated.

Although this study adds to existing literature by comparing levels of youth civic involvement in Italy and the United States and by illuminating some possible influences on civic involvement in both countries, the data are cross-sectional and thus we only speculate about cause. Future longitudinal comparative research is necessary to understand the dynamic process of youth civic development and better inform interventions aimed at increasing youth civic participation in various cultural and political systems.

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