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Moral and political identity and civic involvement in adolescents

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In the USA, civic involvement in adolescence includes political and nonpolitical activities. Given that identities can motivate behavior, how do political and moral identities relate to civic activity choices? In this study, high school students ($N = 1578$) were surveyed about their political and nonpolitical civic actions and their moral and political identities. Overall, students were more involved in service than they were in political activities. Hierarchical regression analyses were used to investigate the relation between identity and involvement, controlling for known correlates of involvement: sex, ethnicity, parent education, peer civic engagement, parent civic engagement and school civic opportunities. Moral and political identity were positively related to overall involvement. Political identity was positively related to political involvement, but was not related to nonpolitical service. Moral identity was positively related to service and expressive-political involvement, but negatively related to traditional-political involvement. Findings are discussed in light of civic and moral education initiatives.

Background

Adolescence is an important time for identity formation (Erikson, 1968). The identity development process involves discerning one's roles and responsibilities in society and deciding which values, beliefs and goals are most essential to one's core self (Erikson, 1968). Many scholars have written about the importance of identity for youths' civic development (e.g. Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Crocetti, Jahromi, & Meeus, 2012; Flanagan, Martinez, & Cumsille, 2010; Hardy, Pratt, Pancer, Olsen, & Lawford, 2010; Hart & Fegley, 1995; Yates & Youniss, 1999). This study adds to current work by investigating how moral identity and political identity relate to civic action in American adolescents. This topic is timely given reports that many American youth are politically disengaged (Damon, 2008; Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2011; Levine, 2009, 2011; Lopez et al., 2006; National Association for Colleges and Employers (NACE), 2012).

Within research on identity and civic development, identity is conceptualized in different ways. For example, there is work on identity status and civic engagement (Crocetti et al., 2012; Hardy et al., 2010), ethnic identity and civic development

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(Stepick & Stepick, 2002) and collective identity and civic participation among peers and generational cohorts (Flanagan et al., 2010). Here, identity is understood as a person's core or essential self. This conceptualization has been used in other civic development research (e.g. Beaumont, Colby, Ehrlich, & Torney-Purta, 2006; Pratt, Hunsberger, Pancer, & Alisat, 2003) and is discussed below in more detail. Within this conceptualization, identity is linked to civic action by the assumption that individuals are motivated to act in ways consistent with their core self. Specifically, if civic (e.g. moral and political) values occupy a central place in one's self, it follows that one will act in accordance with one's civic values.

There are few empirical tests of the relation between identity, as understood here, and civic action. This study sought to contribute to this literature by examining how the centrality of moral and political values to one's identity related to political action and nonpolitical community service among adolescents.

Identity as a motivator for civic action

Moral identity. What makes some people act on their convictions, while others with similar skills, emotions and knowledge do not? Growing research on moral development suggests that the *moral self* or moral identity (moral ID) can help explain moral action (Hardy & Carlo, 2005, 2011). Research on moral ID grew following findings that moral reasoning only modestly predicted moral action (Blasi, 1980), and that moral exemplars were not characterized by particularly high levels of moral reasoning (Colby & Damon, 1992). Moral identity has been proposed as one factor that might bridge the gap between internal processes, such as moral reasoning and moral emotion, and action (Bergman, 2004; Blasi, 1984; Hardy & Carlo, 2005, 2011).

Moral ID typically refers to the extent that being a moral person is important to one's identity. Others have written thorough reviews of the history and conceptualization of moral ID, explaining different perspectives on its structure, mechanisms and dynamics (Hardy & Carlo, 2005, 2011). This study's conceptualization of moral ID is congruent with others' (Blasi, 1984; Colby & Damon, 1992; Frimer & Walker, 2009; Hardy & Carlo, 2005, 2011) and may be understood as the integration of moral goals, commitments, values and beliefs with the cognitive, emotional and motivational structures of the self. Moral ID is thought to motivate action when the integration of self and moral structures causes one to experience an intense motivation to maintain consistency between one's actions and the beliefs, values and goals that are most essential to one's self.

Although moral and civic action is not always one and the same, burgeoning research suggests that civic involvement may be higher among adolescents with stronger moral identities. This may be because some adolescents consider civic action, such as volunteering or taking political action on a meaningful issue, an expression of their moral commitments (Yates & Youniss, 1996). Qualitative studies of adolescent moral exemplars, i.e. youth who have demonstrated extraordinary commitment to moral action, have found that exemplary youth describe

themselves in moral terms more often than comparison youth (Hart & Fegley, 1995; Reimer, 2003; Reimer, Dewitt, & Walker, 2009). There are fewer quantitative studies that examine this type of moral ID and civic action among adolescents, but one found that moral ID positively predicted volunteering over time (Pratt et al., 2003). In this study, moral ID was inconsistently related to political involvement. Other quantitative studies of young adults have linked moral identity to outcomes that might be relevant to civic action, such as pro-social tendencies (Hardy, 2006).

Political identity. Moral ID relates to civic action, but some aspects of civic life are not necessarily moral. For example, one might not consider following political debates, being informed about current events and voting moral acts. For this reason, some have suggested that a more civically focused identity construct, namely political identity (political ID), might compliment moral identity in predicting civic action (Beaumont et al., 2006; Colby et al., 2003, 2007). These scholars have described a type of *political self* model where political identity is the extent that being a politically interested and involved person is important to one's core self. Influenced by Erikson's identity theory (Erikson, 1968), this conceptualization is congruent with others' understanding of political ID as the development of personally meaningful political commitments (Yates & Youniss, 1998). Political identity as understood here departs from much political science research, in which political ID is synonymous with political party or ideological identification (Huddy, 2001).

Within the political self framework, political ID is thought to motivate civic action in the same way that moral ID does (Colby et al., 2003, 2007). Specifically, if being political is a central and essential part of a person, that person should take up political action to maintain consistency between their political values, goals and beliefs and their behavior. There is little empirical work evaluating this framework, but one quantitative study demonstrated that young adults' political ID increased along with their political interest and political action after participating in a civic education course (Beaumont et al., 2006).

Civic action. Civic engagement generally refers to a broad range of civic attitudes, beliefs, interests, skills and behaviors. The term 'civic action' refers to the behavioral facet of civic engagement. Scholars disagree about which actions count as 'civic', with some arguing for broader constructs (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisar, 2007). This study focuses on volunteering and political actions, which are widely considered civic actions.

Empirical research has advanced understanding of civic action among adolescents. Some work has focused on civic action as an independent variable, discussing how involvement may lead to thriving (Lerner, 2004), purpose (Damon, 2008), academic achievement (Davila & Mora, 2007) and healthy

identity formation (Crocetti et al., 2012; Hardy et al., 2010). Other work has focused on civic action as a dependent variable, investigating its individual and contextual correlates and precursors. School factors such as opportunities for involvement and democratic climate (e.g. Flanagan, Cumsille, Sukhdeep, & Galley, 2007; Kahne & Westheimer, 2003, 2006), peer factors (Youniss, McLellan, & Mazer, 2001) and parent civic engagement (Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009) have all been associated with adolescents' civic outcomes. These constructs are included in the statistical models here given their known association with civic action.

Some work on civic action distinguishes between political and nonpolitical action. This practice follows from findings that political and non-political activities are empirically distinct (Obradovic & Masten, 2007). Although many studies combine these two types of civic action, more fine-grained approaches have found differences in how correlates (including identity status and moral ID) relate to political and nonpolitical involvement. Specifically, Crochetti and colleagues found that Italian adolescents with achieved identity status were more involved in volunteering, but that identity status did not relate to political involvement (Crochetti et al., 2012). Similarly, Pratt and colleagues (2003) found that moral ID predicted volunteering over time, but moral ID was not related to political involvement over time.

Further, others have suggested that youth might find politics morally unsavory, while they find community service morally sound (Walker, 2000, 2002). Walker observed this while teaching undergraduates at Rutgers University and working with students in community leadership forums. Walker asked students to describe politics. Students typically described it as dirty, corrupt, ambitious, crooked, dishonest, compromising and slow (Walker, 2000). Students made little mention of the potential for politics to make meaningful, positive changes in the world. In contrast, Walker's students described community service as altruistic, caring, helping, selfless and giving (Walker, 2000). Considering the patterns Walker observed, we would expect moral identity to relate differently to political involvement than it does to nonpolitical involvement. Specifically, moral identity might have a weaker relation with political involvement than it does with volunteering. To investigate this possibility, here political and nonpolitical actions are analyzed separately.

The present study

Taken together, the constructs of moral and political identity may help explain civic action, but the nature of their associations with political and nonpolitical action remains unclear. For example, it is not known if moral and political ID each explains unique variance in involvement after controlling for known correlates of civic action. It is not known if moral ID relates as much to political action as it does to nonpolitical volunteering. It is also not known if political ID relates to overall civic action and to nonpolitical civic action. This study addresses these issues by investigating the following questions.

- (1) What is the unique relation between moral identity and political identity and overall civic action among adolescents?
- (2) What is the unique relation between moral identity and political identity and subtypes of civic action, i.e. political and nonpolitical, among adolescents?

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited as part of a larger study of adolescent civic engagement. The larger study focused on civic engagement among immigrant students, thus schools with large immigrant populations and a higher percentage of minority students were targeted during recruitment. In September 2011, public high schools in the San Francisco Bay Area, Fresno and Pasadena were invited to participate. Overall, 1578 high school seniors from 8 high schools took the civic engagement survey. Participants were 17.4 years old on average, 48% were male and 16% were born outside of the USA. Regarding ethnicity, 46% were Latino, 26% were Asian, 5% were Black, 6% were white, 10% were mixed race and 7% identified as other race. Many of these students were from working-class families; 25% of students had parents who did not graduate from high school and 22% had parents who graduated from high school but had no college education. Approximately 13% of participants had parents who graduated from college and 6% had parents who had a graduate degree. The remaining participants had parents with some college or vocational training (15%), or did not know their parents' level of education.

Measures

Activity involvement. Activity involvement was measured with an adapted version of the Youth Inventory of Involvement (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2007). This inventory asked participants to rate their frequency of involvement in 22 activities since starting high school on a four-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (regularly). Pancer et al.'s original inventory of 30 items was adapted by removing 11 items because pilot tests with 108 students showed minimal participation in these activities and the variability on these items across students was very low. Three items that were not in Pancer et al.'s original inventory were added and pilot tested. The items were: 'expressed my own opinions or beliefs about issues through clothing, buttons, or bumper stickers', 'documented or discussed political and social issues through the internet (Facebook, Twitter, Blog, Myspace, YouTube)', and 'used art, music or digital media (art/graffiti/music/spoken word/dance/videos/rap) to express my views about political or social issues'.

To obtain composites of civic action, items were selected on the inventory that asked specifically about political or community service involvement. This included

7 of the 22 items.¹ Overall civic action was measured by taking the mean of involvement across all of these items. The measure of overall civic action was internally consistent, $\alpha = .76$.

From these seven items, composites were calculated for nonpolitical and two types of political action. For nonpolitical action, involvement in two activities was averaged: 'volunteered at a school event' and 'volunteered with a community service organization'. Volunteering can be political, but the study sought to distinguish between nonpolitical and political volunteering by specifying nonpolitical venues for volunteering. These items were positively correlated $r = .70$, $p < .001$, and internally consistent, $\alpha = .81$.

Composites were created of the two subtypes of political action based on conceptual and empirical considerations.² These were called traditional political action and expressive political action. Traditional political action consisted of two items: contacting a political representative about an issue and writing a letter to a school or community newspaper or publication. These items were positively correlated, $r = .63$, and internally consistent $\alpha = .77$.

Expressive political action included three items: (1) using art, music or digital media to express views about political issues, (2) expressing opinions about issues through clothing, buttons or bumper stickers and (3) discussing political issues through the internet, e.g. through Facebook, Twitter, blogging, Myspace, or Youtube. These items were slightly less internally consistent than other composites, $\alpha = .64$, but were grouped given their conceptual similarity. All of these items dealt with the expression of political views and opinions through some medium, e.g. art, social media or clothing.

Identity. Moral identity and political identity were measured with the Civic Identity Scale (Beaumont et al., 2006). This paper-and-pencil version was adapted from the Good Self Assessment (GSA) and measured the centrality of moral characteristics to an individual's identity (Arnold, 1993). A similar version of this scale has been used in other studies of moral identity (Barriga, Morrison, Liao, & Gibbs, 2001; Barriga, Sullivan-Cossetti, & Gibbs, 2009; Pratt et al., 2003).

In addition to moral identity items, the scale contained political identity items. The complete scale was first used in Beaumont et al.'s (2006) study of civic education for undergraduates. Although this measure has not been psychometrically validated, Pratt et al. (2003) validated a similar measure of moral self. Further, the moral identity subscale has shown consistent internal reliability across studies, and was positively correlated with teacher reports of ethical behavior and self-reports of moral motivation (Barriga et al., 2001). The political identity subscale has also shown internal reliability over time and increased in response to civic education (Beaumont et al., 2006).

Table 1. Identity scale items.

Moral ID items	Political ID items	Other items
Being Fair	Being concerned about international issues	Being smart
Willing to stand up for what I believe is right	Being politically involved	Being creative or imaginative
Being compassionate, concerned about all kinds of people	Being concerned about government decisions and policies	Being rebellious
Being honest		Being outgoing
Being concerned about justice and human rights		Being athletic
Being responsible, someone others can depend on		

The moral and political identity scale presented participants with a diagram of four concentric circles, and the following stem:

Imagine that the drawing below represents you. In the middle circle (4) are things that are very central to who you are as a person. In the next circle (3) are the things that are quite central to who you are, and in the outer circle (2) are things that are somewhat important to who you are. Things that are not part of your identity belong outside the circles (1). Please think about this drawing when you answer the next question. First, read all items, and then go back and decide how central each of them is to your identity. Even if something seems good but isn't an important part of who you are, you should answer 'Not central to my identity.'

Participants were then asked to rate how central 14 items were to their identity: 6 moral identity items, 3 political identity items³ and 5 other items (see Table 1 for all items). Ratings were made on a Likert scale, from 1 (not at all central to my identity) to 4 (very central to my identity). Scores for moral and political identity were computed by averaging the moral and political identity items, respectively. Higher scores corresponded to stronger identity. The moral and political identity subscales were internally consistent, $\alpha = .79$ and $\alpha = .75$, respectively. The heterogeneous other items were less internally consistent, $\alpha = .60$.

Parent, peer and school variables. Civic involvement of participants' parents, peers and the civic opportunities within participants' schools were also assessed. The parent civic involvement scale contained four items (e.g. 'My parents/guardians are active in the community') rated on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This measure was identical to that used by Flanagan, Syversten and Stout (2007), but added one item, 'I talk to my parents/guardians about problems in society and political issues.' The scale was internally reliable, $\alpha = .83$.

The peer civic involvement scale was similar to scales used in previous research (see Flanagan et al., 2007), but the wording of items was adapted to make it more

Table 2. Means of identity, involvement and context variables.

Measure	<i>n</i>	M (SD)	α	Skewness	Kurtosis
Moral ID	1510	3.20 (.58)	.79	-.81 (.06)	.66 (.13)
Political ID	1507	2.16 (.73)	.75	.47 (.06)	-.24 (.13)
Overall involvement	1552	2.02 (.68)	.76	.45 (.06)	-.29 (.12)
Volunteering	1464	2.59 (1.01)	.81	-.11 (.06)	-1.17 (.13)
Traditional-political	1464	1.46 (.71)	.77	1.66 (.06)	2.08 (.13)
Expressive-political	1550	2.03 (.84)	.64	.51 (.06)	-.63 (.12)
Parent civic involvement*	1464	2.62 (.88)	.83	-.05 (.06)	-.37 (.13)
Peer civic involvement*	1463	3.00 (.93)	.70	-.31 (.06)	-.23 (.13)
Civic opportunities*	1562	3.59 (.73)	.84	-.73 (.06)	1.37 (.12)

* Measured on five-point scales, all others measured on four-point scales.

appropriate for the sample. The three-item scale measured the civic involvement of participants' peers (e.g. 'I have close friends who participate in political activities'); 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .70$.

A six-item scale measured the civic opportunities within a participant's school (e.g. 'at my school there are opportunities to get involved in political activities'); 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .84$. Participants' parents' education was also assessed by averaging reported levels of mother and father education. Ethnicity was assessed by having participants select one of seven categories: Asian, African American, Hispanic or Latino, White, Native American, Mixed Race, or Other.

Alpha levels, skewness, kurtosis and means for each construct are reported in Table 2. Levels of skewness and kurtosis for all constructs were adequate, i.e. skewness < 2, kurtosis < 4 (Kendall & Stuart, 1983).

Analysis plan

Hierarchical linear regression was used to examine the relation between identity and civic action. First, action was regressed on participants' sex, ethnicity and parental education. School fixed effects (i.e. categorical variables for each school) were added in the next model of the regression. Fixed effects were added to control for any differences between schools that were not accounted for by the other variables in the regression model. In the third model, we controlled for contextual factors of peer and parent civic engagement and school civic opportunities on civic action. The final model in the regression examined the relation between moral and political identity and civic action, controlling for peer civic engagement, parent civic engagement, school factors, parent education, student ethnicity and sex. Analyses were not clustered by teacher or classroom because (1) students were surveyed very early in their senior year and it was reasoned that teacher and classroom effects on students' past four years of involvement and other variables

were minimal and (2) the analysis controlled for school fixed effects, which accounts for variability across schools. There were minimal missing data, ranging from 2% to 7%, and listwise deletion procedures were used to handle this.

Results

As in previous studies, students reported being more involved in volunteer activities than political ones. Table 2 shows the means of involvement for each type of activity. Mean volunteer action was 2.59 ($SD = 1.01$), average traditional political action was 1.46 ($SD = .71$) and average expressive political action was 2.03 ($SD = .84$). Mean differences between volunteering and both types of political action were statistically significant, $t(1461) = 41.11$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.08, 1.19], $d = 1.24$ for traditional political involvement and $t(1462) = 19.93$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.49, .60], $d = .54$ for expressive political involvement. Further, students were significantly more involved in expressive political activities than traditional ones, $t(1462) = 27.69$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.55, .63], $d = .70$.

Moral identity was also more strongly endorsed than political identity. Average moral identity was 3.2 ($SD = .58$), while average political identity was 2.16 ($SD = .73$). This difference was statistically significant, $t(1506) = 56.40$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.00, 1.07], $d = 1.50$.

Correlations (Pearson's r) between all constructs were calculated. All correlations were positive and significant at the $p < .01$ level. Moral identity was positively correlated with overall civic action, $r(1503) = .27$ and all subtypes of civic action. The correlation between moral identity and volunteering, $r(1455) = .29$, 95% CI [.24, .33], was significantly larger than the correlation between moral identity and traditional political involvement, $r(1456) = .08$, 95% CI [.02, .13], $p < .001$. The correlation between moral identity and expressive political involvement was $r(1503) = .24$, 95% CI [.19, .29]. This correlation was not significantly different than the correlation between moral ID and volunteering, $p = .16$.

Political identity was also positively correlated with overall involvement, $r(1500) = .37$. Correlations between political identity and subtypes of action were stronger for political activities than for volunteering. The correlation between political identity and traditional political activities was $r(1454) = .31$, 95% CI [.26, .36]. This correlation was significantly larger than the correlation between political identity and volunteering, which was $r(1454) = .22$, 95% CI [.17, .27]. This difference was statistically significant at $p < .01$. Expressive political activities and political ID were also positively correlated, $r(1500) = .35$, 95% CI [.31, .39]. This correlation was significantly larger than the correlation between political ID and volunteering, $p < .001$. Correlations between all variables are reported in Table 3.

Next, the relation was investigated between moral and political identity and overall civic action, controlling for sex, ethnicity, parent education, parent and peer civic involvement, school fixed effects and civic opportunities at school. The study controlled for political identity when investigating the relation between moral ID and involvement and for moral identity when investigating the relation between

Table 3. Bivariate correlations for identity, involvement and context variables.

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Political ID	–								
2. Moral ID	.43	–							
3. Overall involvement	.37	.27	–						
4. Volunteering	.22	.29	.73	–					
5. Traditional-political	.31	.08	.68	.29	–				
6. Expressive-political	.35	.24	.86	.37	.44	–			
7. Parent civic	.30	.13	.29	.20	.24	.24	–		
8. Peer civic	.38	.27	.46	.42	.26	.37	.40	–	
9. Civic opportunities	.19	.29	.25	.32	.10	.14	.16	.30	–

All correlations are significant at $p < .01$.

political ID and involvement. Moral identity significantly predicted overall civic action, $\beta = .06$, $t(1456) = 2.33$, $p = .02$. Political identity also significantly predicted overall civic action, $\beta = .19$, $t(1456) = 7.30$, $p < .001$.

Next, the relation between moral and political identity and subtypes of civic action was investigated, controlling for the same covariates and contextual variables. Again, these models investigated the unique variance explained by moral and political identity, controlling for the other variables.

Moral identity was significantly related to volunteering, $\beta = .12$, $t(1456) = 4.52$, $p < .001$, but political identity was not related to volunteering, $\beta = .03$, $t(1456) = 1.15$, $p = .27$. By contrast, political identity was related to traditional political action, $\beta = .24$, $t(1456) = 8.22$, $p < .001$ and to expressive political action, $\beta = .20$, $t(1542) = 6.94$, $p < .001$. Moral identity was also positively related to expressive political action, $\beta = .07$, $t(1542) = 2.41$, $p < .01$ but was negatively related to traditional political action, $\beta = -.09$, $t(1456) = -3.01$, $p < .01$. Full regression results are reported in Table 4.

Discussion

The study set out to understand how moral and political identity relate to adolescents' civic action. The unique contributions of moral identity and political identity to political and nonpolitical involvement were investigated. It was found that moral identity, controlling for political identity, contextual factors and covariates, was positively related to volunteering and to some types of political action, but negatively related to other types of political action. Political identity, controlling for moral identity, contextual factors and covariates, was positively related to political action, but not related to nonpolitical volunteering.

Table 4. Hierarchical multiple regression predicting civic involvement.

Predictor	Type of involvement							
	Overall		Volunteering		Trad-Political		Exprss-Political	
	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.03***		.10***		.01*		.03***	
Control variables ^a								
Step 2	.01***		.02***		.02***		.003***	
School FE								
Step 3	.23***		.18***		.1***		.14***	
Parent		.12***		.06*		.16***		.08**
Peer		.39***		.32***		.19***		.33***
School		.09**		.17***		.04		.44
Step 4	.04***		.01***		.04***		.04***	
Moral ID		.06*		.12***		-.09**		.07**
Political ID		.19***		.03		.24***		.20***
Total R^2	.31***		.31***		.17***		.21***	
<i>n</i>	1464		1464		1464		1550	

^aControl variables were participants' sex, ethnicity and parents' education. School FE are school fixed effects. Parent, peer and school are parent and peer civic involvement, and school civic opportunities. Trad-Political is traditional-political involvement, Exprss-Political is expressive-political involvement. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Political identity

Adolescents' political identity was related to political action, but not significantly related to nonpolitical volunteering. These findings are noteworthy for a few reasons. First, political identity was strongly associated with political action. Although the direction of causation is undecipherable in this study, findings corroborate theoretical and qualitative empirical work suggesting that identity and behavior go together (Colby & Damon, 1992; Colby et al., 2003, 2007). Second, findings highlight that some high school youth are politically engaged. Political identity and engagement is emerging in these youth relatively early and is evident even before they can vote. This finding is encouraging as political motivation and commitment might be expected to grow as these youth age and acquire more civic privileges and responsibilities (Yates & Youniss, 1998). Third, it is important to remember the nature of the sample with interpreting the political action and identity findings. Many of the immigrant students who participated in the study may have had parents who were not allowed to engage in political action in their countries of origin. Thus, a large proportion of participants may not have had political role models in their parents.

Determining how and why some youth develop a sense of political identity relatively early in life is an important avenue for further research. Previous studies

of this question have focused on the role of secondary and higher education curriculum in cultivating political identity (e.g. Colby et al., 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1998). Future work could expand on these studies by investigating other facets of education, e.g. the role of teachers and classroom climate in facilitating political identity formation and the role of middle and elementary education in cultivating political identity. Investigating factors outside of school, such as family, community organizations or neighborhood contexts and their relation to political identity formation could also be explored.

Moral identity

Adolescents' moral identity also explained unique variance in involvement. For the most part, the greater youths' moral identity, the more involved they were in volunteering and expressive political activities. These findings are generally consistent with previous research on moral identity and civic engagement (Pratt et al., 2003). What is not consistent with previous research is the finding that increased moral identity was negatively related to traditional political action. When political identity and other covariates were controlled, heightened moral identity decreased the probability that students engaged in traditional political activities.

A few issues should be considered when interpreting this finding. First, the measure of traditional political involvement encompassed a narrow assortment of activities and participation in these activities was low. Further, the magnitude of the coefficient for moral identity is relatively small. Finally, the models explain a small amount of variance in traditional political action, perhaps because of limited involvement variance.

Nevertheless, the analyses suggest that the relation between moral identity and political involvement may be more nuanced than anticipated. This finding could be explained by related phenomena. First, students may perceive politics as morally unsavory (Walker, 2000, 2002), and this perception may be fed by the current national climate. National trust in government has decreased in recent years. Government, politics and partisanship are seen as greater problems today than they were in 2008 (Pew Research Center, 2011). In 2011, desire to re-elect members of congress reached the lowest level ever observed by the Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, 2011). This context likely affects young people's attitudes and beliefs about government via their interactions with mediating institutions (Flanagan et al., 2010). Second, students may lack opportunities to be involved in politics, and education that might prepare them to take political action (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003). Consequently adolescents may not perceive politics as an arena where they can 'make a difference'.

Limitations

These results suggest that moral and political identity explain unique variance in involvement, even while controlling for covariates. However, these findings are not

without limitation. For one, results may not generalize to communities with different ethnic and immigrant compositions. The sample is not nationally representative and the high proportion of racial minorities and first generation immigrants reflects the composition of California and the sampling strategy. At the same time, immigrants and minority students are often underrepresented in studies of civic engagement. One contribution of this study is that it examines moral and political identity and involvement among a population that is often underrepresented in civic engagement research.

Next, the measures may have been subject to social desirability bias. This issue is particularly pertinent to the measure of moral identity. Though moral identity was not overly skewed (skewness = -0.8), the mean of moral identity was high, and other work has shown that trait-measures of moral identity tend to correlate with social desirability. A measure of social desirability was not included in the survey and we cannot control for it. The study also did not use a difference score method to mitigate social desirability bias. The difference score technique, which involves subtracting the mean of positive non-moral traits from the mean of moral traits to create a composite of moral identity, has been used by others (Barriga et al., 2001, 2009; Hardy, 2006; Pratt et al., 2003). The study opted not to use this method because it assumes that constructs are measured without error. Instead, a number of nonpolitical and non-moral traits were included in the measure to avert suspicion about the measure's purpose. We hoped that these filler items would detract from the emphasis on moral and political traits and reduce social desirability bias in respondents.

Relatedly, validated instruments of moral and political identity were not used. Although the instruments have been used in previous studies and the pilot data suggested that these constructs were reliable, they may not have adequately measured the constructs within the surveyed population. Further, trait measures of identity are limited by their inability to capture endorsement of identity across contexts. Some research suggests that individuals' moral identity is fluid and context-dependent (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). The measure assumed a level of trait stability across contexts.

Next, the measures of civic action were based on retrospective self-reports. Although this is a common method of measuring involvement in quantitative studies of civic engagement, the likelihood of some measurement error associated with this technique is acknowledged. Students may have misremembered their involvement, or intentionally misreported it. In this study it is impossible to know whether self-reports of civic action were upwardly or downwardly biased. Future studies could use different techniques when measuring involvement, e.g. collecting data from multiple informants, or in real time via a journaling method.

Finally, this study design does not allow one to decipher causal pathways between involvement and identity. The correlational nature of the analyses here do not indicate whether identity causes involvement or vice versa. Recent studies of civic engagement and identity have found a bidirectional relation between these

constructs (Hardy et al., 2010; Pancer et al., 2007). Future studies could adopt a longitudinal or experimental approach to examine causality.

Despite these limitations, the analyses provide clues about how moral and political identity relate to civic action in adolescence. These findings are the first to tease apart the unique contributions made by moral and political identity in explaining different types of civic action.

Suggestions for future research

Some have argued that moral and civic education that does not explicitly address political development (e.g. character education or service-learning that focuses solely on personal growth) will not lead to fully developed, politically engaged citizens (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Walker, 2002). The findings from this study suggest that in some cases heightened moral identity without political identity might be negatively related to certain types of political engagement. Future research should examine the extent to which non-political students see their moral commitments as a barrier to political involvement.

Relatedly, students may not consider political engagement a viable expression of moral principles, or a way to pursue moral goods. Children and adolescents from a variety of cultures have moral concepts related to personal rights, civil liberties and democracy (Helwig, 2006). For example, freedom of speech and freedom of religion appear to be held as 'natural rights' by many American adolescents, who often judge government restrictions of these civil liberties as morally wrong (Helwig, 1995). However, the extent to which adolescents conceive of the modern political arena as a space where moral injustices are rectified and moral goods are pursued is an open question. Future research could describe how students perceive connections between moral and political domains.

Conclusion

This research invites us to consider how moral and political identity relate to civic action among adolescents. Moral identity, as we know, can powerfully relate to civic action. However, this relation may not hold for all individuals and all types of civic action. While recognizing that there can be real differences between individuals in how political and moral identity manifest in engagement, and without denying differences between individuals in how they integrate moral and political motivations, this study suggests the relation between moral identity and political involvement may not be as straightforward as is often assumed. In contrast, political identity appears to be a powerful construct for predicting adolescents' political engagement.

Notes

1. The other 15 items on the involvement inventory were not included in the analyses here either because they did not ask explicitly about volunteering or political action (e.g. items such as ‘earned money to support my family’), or because they did not cohere with other political items empirically (e.g. protesting and petitioning has very low loadings ($< .25$) on political involvement factors).
2. Empirical considerations included a factor analysis (Principle Axis Factoring) of 22 involvement items, using promax rotation, where two factors for political involvement emerged. All factors had an eigenvalue > 1 . Factor loadings were $> .5$, except for the social media item, which had a loading of $.42$. Statistical analyses were conducted on a composite of expressive political involvement that excluded this item and results were not different. Given the conceptual similarity of this item to others, and the burgeoning importance of social media in youths’ civic action, this item was retained. Other potential political items on the inventory (e.g. protesting, petitioning) were not included in the composites as they did not load on either factor for political involvements (loadings $< .25$).
3. One of the political identity items asks participants: ‘how central to my identity is being politically involved?’ Although this item asks about political involvement, the centrality stem makes is distinct from other involvement items. Correlations between the politically involved identity item and traditional and expressive political action were $r = .35$ and $r = .33$, respectively, indicating unique variance between the identity item and other indices of political action.

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