‘We don’t need no education’: Civic identity and civic participation in formal and informal education contexts

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Engaged electorates are central to the functioning of democracy yet we know surprisingly little about how engaged orientations develop. Existing research points to the important role of formal education (Beaumont, Colby, Ehrlich & Torney-Purta, 2006; Galston, 2001; Torney-Purta, 2002; Youniss, 2011) and informal educational activities (Kahne & Sporte, 2008) in developing an orientation towards participation in civic life. The education literature also emphasises the important role of a developing sense of civic responsibility and civic identity (Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997) but says little about the ways in which these personal and social transformations are realized (Flanagan, 2003; Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002).

Here we bring together work on education and civic identity with insights from the social identity tradition to answer questions that have long concerned education, developmental and political scholars: How do we encourage a sense of civic identity through the education process? What is the role of formal and informal education in encouraging the development of civic identity? While civic identity has primarily been considered from an Eriksonian identity perspective (e.g. Yates & Youniss, 1998), the social identity approach has much to contribute to these questions.

In this chapter we argue that the development of civic identity through education is a social achievement. When opinions about how the world should be are experienced as social identity (“we”) rather than as personal identity (“me”) then they gain increased power to bring about change (see McGarty, Lala & Thomas, 2012; Smith, Thomas, & McGarty, in press). We will describe empirical work that shows that people can come to a new understanding of themselves (identity) and the civic world that they live in (participation) through structured group interaction or discussion (Thomas & McGarty, 2009; Thomas,
McGarty & Mavor, 2009; Thomas, Smith, McGarty & Postmes, 2010; see also Campbell, 2008). Other work shows social identity transformation through an intervention where university students learn to oppose everyday racism (Pedersen, Paradies, Hartley & Dunn, 2011). Finally, we discuss how providing support for people recovering from severe trauma (genocide survivors) precipitates identity change and promotes global civic engagement (McGarty et al, 2012).

**Promoting Civic Engagement through Education: What do we know?**

There is considerable educational and psychological research showing that civic engagement is fostered in formal and informal education. Flanagan (2013, p.7) argued that schools and universities are spaces where young people “spend time, where they have politically relevant experiences including belonging to groups and exercising the rights and responsibilities associated with membership in those groups”. Research consistently shows that duration of formal schooling – and attendance at university or college – predicts subsequent civic engagement (e.g. Finlay, Flanagan & Wray-Luke, 2011). Other research implicates specific educational curricula geared towards promoting civic engagement. Beaumont et al., (2006) showed that educational interventions with a focus on political engagement can significantly boost many dimensions of democratic participation, including expectations for future political activity, increased knowledge and skills in how to effectively participate. Informal contexts also help develop an orientation towards participation in civic life. An informal context can be defined as a setting where people gather together for an activity that may not necessarily follow a structured plan, or where civic learning is an indirect outcome but not the primary aim of the exercise. For example, Finlay et al. (2011; also Flanagan & Levine, 2010) showed that a service and training program provided beneficial civic learning opportunities, particularly for disadvantaged youth. Youniss et al (1997) found that community service predicted both conventional (e.g. voting) and
unconventional (e.g. boycotting/demonstrating) political involvement, as well as subsequent involvement in community service projects. Elsewhere, one recent study suggests that formal (classroom-based) and more informal (service learning opportunities) may promote different kinds of engagement in civic and political action (Kahne, Crow & Lee, 2013). Discussion of societal issues in the classroom promotes engagement with political issues and voting (so-called “big P” politics), while service learning increases interest and participation in community-based actions (so-called “little P” politics).

However, we know surprisingly little about how to foster these processes in specific interventions or classroom practices. That is, beyond pointing to the years of schooling, participation in voluntary activities or the important role of classroom discussion in promoting a sense of civic engagement (e.g. Campbell, 2008; Torney-Purta, 2002; Youniss, 2011), the literature does not explain how to harness these forces to bolster engagement in the classroom. Research from the social identity tradition may help fill some of these gaps.

**Civic Identities are Social Identities**

Civic engagement refers to interest, values, beliefs, skills, knowledge and action in matters within the community, political system and beyond the immediate self, friends, and family (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Crocetti, Jahromi & Meeus, 2012). Civic involvement extends beyond the immediate personal self and interpersonal relationships to doing things that benefit members of other groups and the broader community. It stands to reason that these actions are therefore underpinned by identity at a social or group level of self-definition (a social identity) rather than individual or personal identity(Turner, Oakes, Haslam & McGarty, 1994): civic identities are inherently social identities. The social identity approach is thus especially relevant here, as it offers a conceptual framework for understanding the relation between individual and society – and civic involvement is entirely about that relationship.
Arguably, the social identity approach to civic identity formation provides a complementary project to the Eriksonian civic identity project (Youniss et al., 1997). As with the Eriksonian approach, social identity theorists agree that individual and society are not separate entities but part of a single relationship (p. 626; see Turner & Oakes, 1986). We share a concern with the development of ideological clarification by which civic identity emerges from the effort of youth to find meaning by linking ideology with existing group memberships (Youniss et al, 1997; p. 625). We agree that our understanding of civic identities is first and foremost an understanding of the formation of aspects of self that have ideology (understandings of how the world should be) at their core.

An extension of this approach is the proposal that many forms of civic participation (e.g. letter writing, petition signing, consciousness raising with friends and family, joining grassroots organizations, voting) rest on opinions about ‘the way the world should be’ (Smith et al, in press; Thomas et al., 2009). That is, civic identities can be opinion-based identities (McGarty et al., 2012). Extending on the arguments above, where opinions about the way the world should be are experienced as shared and as a defining feature of “us” (a social identity or group membership), rather than as idiosyncratic features of “me” (a personal identity; Bliuc, McGarty, Reynolds, & Muntele, 2007; McGarty, Bliuc, Thomas, & Bongiorno, 2009) they gain power to promote change. Put differently, in order to sustain efforts these opinions need to be shared with others: it is difficult to coordinate social action unless other people agree with the cause. Consistent with these points, opinion-based groups have been shown to be excellent predictors of engagement in a range of civic actions including socio-political action (Bliuc et al., 2007; Cameron & Nickerson, 2009; Thomas, Mavor & McGarty, 2012), solidarity-based action with sexual minority groups (Russell, 2011) and volunteerism (Thomas, 2005).
Where do such opinion-based group identities come from?

The Interactive Model of Identity Formation (Postmes, Haslam & Swaab, 2005) helps explain where opinion-based identities come from. The model distinguishes between identities that are formed ‘top down’ from an awareness of shared characteristics (deductive identities); and those that are formed ‘bottom up’ by combining characteristics of individuals in context (inductive identities). Whereas deductive identity formation occurs where people access shared existing social category membership (‘what it means’ to be a man, woman, young person, political opponent or supporter), inductive identity formation involves communication (social interaction, emotional displays) between potential group members. That is, individuals construct a shared sense of ‘us’ through processes of communication, negotiation and debate.

Recent work has extended this to consider the formation of opinion-based social identities that can promote civic action. Thomas et al.’s (2009) Normative Alignment Model drew on collective action research (see van Zomeren, Postmes & Spears, 2008) to suggest that social interaction helps people to develop integrated understandings of themselves (identity), their feelings (emotions) and beliefs (beliefs) about intended action. This integration of identity and norms for action, emotion and belief promotes the formation of identities that can be sustainable over time. More recently still, Smith et al. (in press, see especially Table 1) developed a broader process account of how individuals become aware of, and engaged in, various forms of civic action. According to Smith et al., the formation of the Identity-Norm Nexus has its origins in an awareness that things are not as they should be (see Packer, 2008). However, as we argued above, isolated opinion is not sufficient to enable mobilization. Rather, this awareness needs to be shared in order to provide the basis for the formation of groups that can seek to change the world. Moreover, and importantly for our current purposes, Smith et al. (in press) specify a crucial moderator of these identity
formation processes: namely, that interaction must be experienced as validating and consensual in order for this shared world view to take force in the minds of individuals.

The implications of this theoretical framework are twofold: civic identities are dynamic and changeable (Turner et al., 1987; also Drury & Reicher, 1999, 2000, 2005); and they can be constructed and negotiated through interaction and deliberation. Put differently, *civic identities are collective achievements* that are aired and validated in public spaces (Smith et al., in press; also McGarty et al., in press; McGarty et al., 2012). In what follows we consider three applications of this approach to promoting engagement with civic issues (international development, prejudice reduction, support for victims of genocide), in formal and informal education contexts.

**Civic Social Identity Formation in Practice: Identity in the Classroom**

*Fostering civic social identity formation in the classroom through social interaction*

In the first, we have directly considered the role of social interaction in fostering civic social identity formation in the classroom. Building on the arguments above, Thomas et al. (2009) suggest that it is through structured small group discussion that participants come to experience their opinions as social and shared. The *opinion-based group interaction method* (OBGIM: Thomas & McGarty, 2009; also Gee, Khalaf & McGarty, 2007) illustrates how these processes occur in practice; it is comprised of three steps. In the first step, participants are given basic information about a relevant cause; this information is intended to provide background for a subsequent discussion and to establish whether the participant nominally supports that cause. Much of our work to date has focused on global citizenship in relation to efforts to achieve safe drinking water for people in developing nations (Water for Life: http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade); in this case, participants read information about the need for safe drinking water for people in developing countries. In the second step, participants are assigned small groups of 3-5 and instructed to engage in 20-30 minutes
discussion. Participants are asked to generate practical ways to ensure access to safe drinking water for people in developing countries. The written instructions to participants signify the importance of consensus in the interaction: “During your discussion a number of views and opinions are likely to be raised, but it is really important that you come to an agreement on what your position is on this issue and come to an agreement on strategies that you all believe will be effective.” In a final step, participants complete quantitative measures of: their intended engagement with action, civic opinion-based social identity (“I identify as someone who supports the goals of ‘Water for Life’”; following Cameron, 2004; Leach et al., 2008), consensus of opinion (“my group agreed on the importance of this issue”) and action (“my group agreed on relevant strategies”), emotions and efficacy beliefs (see Thomas & McGarty, 2009).

Thomas and McGarty (2009) found that group interaction in a university student sample boosted opinion-based social identification, feelings of outrage, beliefs about the effectiveness of co-ordinated action (group efficacy; Bandura, 2000) and – significantly – commitment to engage in collective action to support access to safe drinking water for people in developing countries. They also found that these effects were pronounced where interacting groups had been primed with an injunctive outrage norm: specifically, participants were requested to think of ways to make community members outraged about injustice. Another study suggests that, through social interaction, members of a community sample developed a sense of political engagement in opposition to battery farming of chickens and this translated to immediate concrete action (signing a letter to a government minister; Thomas, McGarty & Louis, in press).

This evidence suggests that, through co-construction of meaning, group interaction helped validate new world-views, ways of being (identity), and intended actions. However, such group interactions can backfire (Finlay, Wray-Luke & Flanagan, 2010; Hardy,
Lawrence & Grant, 2005). Smith et al. (in press; also Festinger, 1950, 1954) explicitly describe the establishment of consensus and validation as boundary conditions for the subsequent emergence of positive effects. Thus, anything that blocks a group’s ability to reach agreement, or inhibits a sense of enjoyment and validation from the task, will mean that effects are attenuated or, worse, may promote backlash such that group members are even less engaged post-interaction. These boundary conditions may be particularly significant in classrooms where students may have a shared (perhaps antagonistic) history with individuals in their small group; and they may see the activity as a mundane learning task rather than one with ‘real world’ significance.

Although our previous evidence has demonstrated a positive effect on average, to consider the process and variation in the method in more detail and test effects in a formal education environment we recently employed the OBGIM with high school students in their classrooms. To promote engagement with the task, students were given iPads to read the information. To investigate the process and variability associated with the emergence of positive effects we measured the degree of consensus of opinion and action; the extent to which the activity had been internalised as effective and useful (following Ryan & Deci, 2000) and key outcomes relating to immediate and future civic action, identity, hope for the future (c.f. Flanagan, 2013) and feelings of personal responsibility (c.f. Yates & Youniss, 1998).

Consistent with the framework above, results showed that reaching agreement on opinion and action precipitated the formation of a new civic social identity, feelings of personal responsibility, hope for the future, and commitment to immediate and future action. These effects were mediated, however, by the extent to which students had internalised the activity as effective and useful (see also Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Put differently, failure to
reach consensus or agreement blocked the internalisation of effective agency which, in turn, undermined the formation of civic identity and action.

The implications that can be drawn from these studies are that the classroom context is a crucial environment for the emergence of civic social identity. However, just as there are processes that will facilitate identity formation, there are also processes that will undermine it. Educators need to be aware of the structural conditions that may produce engagement and disengagement - in particular it is important when conducting similar classroom activities to highlight the task as requiring collaborative, not individual, effort.

**Fostering civic social identity through educational interventions**

The promotion of social harmony and inclusion are also important components of civic engagement and, in another line of research, we have been considering how these components can be fostered through educational interventions. Research identifies formal education as central to social attitudes (e.g. Finlay, Flanagan & Wray-Luke, 2011) but, again, relatively little is known about how this can be effectively executed in the classroom. One exception here is the work of Pedersen and colleagues, who report a promising educational intervention, reporting a 9.4% reduction in prejudice against Indigenous Australians in one study (Pedersen & Barlow, 2008) and 17.2% in another (Pedersen, Paradies, Dunn & Hartley, 2011a; also Beaumont et al.’s, 2006, work on political competence).

The educational intervention is based on the anti-prejudice mechanisms described by Pedersen, Walker, Paradies and Guerin (2011b). Specifically, (1) providing accurate information about marginalised groups (2) showing respect for the audience (3) choosing emotions to target wisely; e.g., attempting to invoke empathy rather than guilt (4) not only emphasising similarity between ‘ingroups’ and ‘outgroups’ but also acknowledging difference (5) taking local needs into account: context matters (6) using cognitive dissonance with respect to egalitarian values but prejudiced views (7) invoking positive social norms (8)
arranging appropriate contact with the ‘outgroup’, and (9) providing a space to examine the role of self and identity in prejudice (in particular, discussing the role of “whiteness” and a more inclusive collective identity). They also noted the importance of (10) finding alternate talk (11) taking into account the function of attitudes such as values and experience and (12) using multiple voices from multiple disciplines.

The goals of this approach are to provide time and a (supportive) space to allow participants to fully consider what their views are, and interrogate the origins of those views. For many people, the only information they receive is from the media which is often inaccurate, dehumanising and inflammatory (e.g. Sulaiman-Hill, Thompson, Afsar, & Hodliffe, 2011, with respect to asylum seekers). Participants are encouraged to freely but respectfully share their world views; and to consider alternative viewpoints than what is often heard in the community or in the media. Participants are asked to air and debate their views and the seminars emphasise active deliberation on these matters. In short, the pedagogical approach emphasizes the need to air views collectively, de-construct, re-negotiate and re-construct those views in a way that supports inclusion. Participants are also brought into contact with members of marginalised groups. For example, Pedersen routinely brings in a young Tamil refugee who had originally arrived in Australia by boat to speak to her classes and this has a dramatic and positive effect of the students (following, e.g. Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, work on intergroup contact theory). Finally, it is important to know how to deal with prejudice and racism when exposed to it. Research shows the importance of “being prepared” for prejudice (Plous, 2000; Dunn, Nelson & Pedersen, 2013). Without this preparation, it is likely that many opponents of prejudice will not able to respond effectively to everyday prejudice. Accordingly, classroom discussion focuses on ‘finding words’ to effectively and safely confront prejudice in everyday social interaction.
Given that this educational intervention has previously shown positive effects in boosting positive attitudes towards many stigmatized or disadvantaged groups in contemporary Australian society (Muslim people, asylum seekers, Indigenous Australians) we have sought to consider the role of social identity in engendering these shifts. Consistent with our theoretical framework above, we focused on identities based on shared opinion about the ways that things should be (opinion-based groups) rather than contestable superordinate national social identities (see Bliuc et al. 2012. Specifically, we considered an opinion-based identity based on opinions about harmonious relations between Muslim and non-Muslim people. So far our research has shown that, along with the increased positivity towards Muslim people, participants also reported an increased sense of ‘self’ as someone who supports harmonious, inclusive social relations between Muslim and non-Muslim people. That is, participants reported that they were more likely to see themselves as part of a group supporting better relations between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians, demonstrating that identity may be an anchor for changing relevant self-understandings, attitudes, beliefs, norms and actions.

Consistent with the research on the dynamics of small interacting groups, this research in large group teaching contexts suggests that providing spaces for people to contest and debate is central. If we are correct that ideology is always about identity (and identity is often about ideology; see McGarty et al., 2009; also Wright, 2009), then it is essential that those who seek to promote ideologies that oppose prejudice and injustice provide spaces for those ideologies to emerge as valid expressions of identities, rather than seek to impose them as orthodoxies.
**Fostering civic social identity through online content creation**

In a third line of research we are investigating how participation in informal activities (specifically, creating online audiovisual messages) can promote civic engagement in relation to support for victims of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. As described above, existing research implicates volunteerism and community work in fostering a subsequent sense of civic engagement into adulthood (Finlay et al., 2011; Flanagan, 2003; Youniss et al., 1997). Taking inspiration from this and from the proliferation of online methods for disseminating support (that is, beyond traditional notions of volunteerism and community participation), this line of research entails young Australians creating and disseminating audio-visual messages of support for the survivors of the Rwandan genocide.

Participation is comprised of three steps. In the first step, participants (who are adolescents or young adults under 25) watch audiovisual ‘messages of hope’ from survivors of the Rwandan genocide (see www.100messagesofhope.com). These messages do not focus on traumatic details and events surrounding the genocide; rather, they are intended to convey hope for the future and a sense of resilience in the face of adversity. In this way, survivors are making a statement of collective hope for the future of themselves and as Rwandans (see also Braithwaite, 2004).

In a second step, participants are asked to record their own messages of support for these survivors. These messages are intended to support and affirm survivors’ efforts to heal and rebuild but participants are allowed full control over length and content of their own messages. Prior to the content creation activity, participants are told that their final messages would be shared online to an international audience that could, potentially, include genocide survivors themselves. In generating these messages participants begin to publically air, communicate and share their perceptions and world views (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Moreover, through this process participants are explicitly placed in the role of ‘supporter’. As
with traditional forms of social or community work, doing so allows them to enact alternative
versions of ‘self’ and shift their focus from their personal or idiosyncratic self, to identify
with a broader group and its goals (see Flanagan, 2003). Indeed, Yates and Youniss (1998)
show that young participants in traditional forms of community service often reflect on this
service as having an ongoing influence that helped to define their sense of identity. Similarly
here, this creative exercise allows participants to form identities congruent with a hopeful
orientation about how they want the world to be (see also Haslam, Adarves-Yorno, Postmes,
& Jans, 2013). We contend that these individual acts of creation – in our case, the creation
and sharing of supportive messages – when undertaken in a context explicitly purposed
towards emphasising social good will similarly invoke and advance social identity
characterised by a focus on positive social change.

In a third and final stage messages are posted online (on a closed YouTube channel
www.youtube.com/sppru). Participants then complete quantitative measures of key variables
relating to their own personal well-being, feelings of hope and satisfaction, and their intention
to engage in future action to support post-conflict reconciliation, and global citizenship.

Consistent with our arguments above, pilot research (involving 33 young Australians
recruited through high schools and a university) showed that participants expressed a range of
positive emotions (including hope, admiration and pride) in relation to participation. They
expressed belief in what Rwandan survivors had achieved, and what they themselves were
achieving through their support messages. They viewed creating and sharing hope and
support messages as helping Rwandan survivors by raising awareness and support among
others not directly affected by the genocide, and as a mechanism to cultivate social
engagement and unity. Indeed, many of the messages themselves speak directly to processes
of engagement and solidarity (c.f. Reicher, Cassidy, Wolpert, Bopkins & Levine, 2006):
You need to know that the world does support you and the world will stand at your back;
As you continue to heal my own brothers and sisters, I want you to know that you are not alone in building a brighter future;
Let us understand, acknowledge, and maybe accept, so one day we can unite as a community, share our stories of life, and build a world in which we never have to experience the hurt and pain that human beings can inflict.
Importantly, all of the young people who took part in the pilot study genuinely engaged in the creation task, and every participant found the processes of both viewing and creating hope and support messages rewarding and worthwhile. Through this process participants are allowed and encouraged to imagine alternative ways of being, and form identities congruent with a hopeful orientation about how they want the world to be.

While our ongoing programme is currently focussed on young participants taking part independent of classroom settings, one of our aims is to develop a framework for the production and exchange of hopeful and supportive messages that can be applied across broad contexts, including formal classroom settings. The broader program of research also involves participants who are themselves recruited from vulnerable communities (e.g., cancer survivors, people with mental illnesses). Following the logic that the act of supporting vulnerable others’ can itself bestow benefits on the helpee (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010), there may be particular benefits for people who are traditionally recipients of assistance as they transform their self-perception from being passive recipients of support to active providers of support. More generally, our research suggests that implementing such a framework in and outside the classroom might also challenge students and other young people to develop cognitive alternatives for and about themselves and others, and engender different, positively
oriented, sets of social relations between groups and communities (see Gee & McGarty, 2013, in press).

**Concluding comments**

We started this paper by illustrating that, although it has long been recognised that the classroom is an important space for developing forms of civic engagement and consciousness, there is little research that speaks to the underlying psychological processes. In this chapter we have considered the evidence in relation to: small group learning exercises, large group learning, evidence in relation to global citizenship of international development and post-conflict reconstruction, as well as domestic citizenship regarding standing up to prejudice and discrimination in everyday social interaction. We have also considered the role of these processes in contexts which harness the proliferation of online methods where young people are invited to provide messages of support for victims of genocide.

The body of research we have outlined seeks to highlight the opportunities for educational contexts to provide the building blocks for civic participation through social identity. Central to the current research is the idea that civic identities are often underpinned by opinions about how the world should be (opinion-based identities); and that people can come to new understandings of themselves (i.e. identity) and the world that they live in, through carefully structured small group discussion and deliberation. Educators need to find ways of providing spaces that allow for people to ‘become the change they want to see in the world’ (paraphrasing words attributed to M.H Ghandi) in order to foster these processes in the classroom.
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