Journal of Adolescent Research

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Parissa Jahromi Ballard

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What is This?

What Motivates Youth Civic Involvement?

Parissa J. Ballard[1]

Abstract

The topic of youth civic engagement is increasingly popular in social science research; however, the question of why some youth are civically involved while others are not is not well understood. This article addresses the following questions: What motivations and barriers do youth report for civic involvement? How do motivations and barriers differ across school contexts? A qualitative study using in-depth semi-structured interviews with youth ($N = 22$) was used to identify four categories of motivations and two categories of barriers for civic involvement. Variation emerged in the motivations and barriers for civic involvement both within and across school contexts. Understanding civic motivations in context uncovers new insights about how to structure opportunities to better facilitate youth civic involvement.

Keywords

civic engagement, motivation, adolescence, civic involvement, qualitative research, positive youth development

Many youth participate in varied forms of civic involvement on a regular basis. However, many other youth do not. To understand why this is so, research on youth civic engagement emphasizes social contexts such as family values, peer groups, and opportunities for civic participation (e.g., Wray-Lake, 2008; Youniss & Levine, 2009); demographic characteristics such as race, gender, age, socio-economic status (SES), immigrant status (e.g., Levinson, 2007); and the

[1]University of California, San Francisco, USA
[2]University of California, Berkeley, USA

Corresponding Author:
Parissa J. Ballard, Center for Health and Community, University of California, San Francisco, 3333 California Street, Suite 465, San Francisco, CA 94118, USA.
Email: Ballardpj@chc.ucsf.edu

knowledge and skills youth acquire through civic classes or leadership programs (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2001) that contribute to youth civic involvement. However, little research addresses *why* these contexts, characteristics, and skills facilitate civic involvement for some youth but not others. What compels and repels young people from civic involvement?

Youth Civic Involvement

The success of democratic societies depends on whether, and how, citizens engage with others in social organizations, take collective action, and work toward goals that will benefit society (e.g., Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Although it is not always clear which actions benefit society, it is clearly desirable in a democracy for citizens to engage with others and grapple with civic issues. In addition to benefiting society, civic involvement confers individual political benefits such as enhancing the chances that one's interests are represented in political processes (Flanagan, 2009), and psychological benefits such as empowerment and connection with others (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997).

In scholarship about the relations between young people and their communities, the term *civic engagement* is often used. There are numerous definitions for this term (Adler & Goggin, 2005) but it is often used as a broad term referring to a set of constructs such as civic skills, knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and goals. In the present study, the term *civic involvement* is used to refer specifically to the civic activities that youth participate in. There is debate about what counts as civic involvement. For example, political activity and volunteerism are shown to be distinct forms of civic activities (Obradović & Masten, 2007; Walker, 2000, 2002). However, a broad definition of "civic" is commonly used to include both activity types, especially among youth as they have fewer opportunities for direct political involvement (Flanagan, 2008). This inclusive definition is used in the present study to achieve the goal of identifying broad categories of motivations across types of civic involvement. Scholarship on youth civic involvement provides many insights about the level and nature of such involvement; however, questions remain regarding what motivates youth toward civic involvement.

Existing Approaches to Understanding Youth Civic Involvement: A Missing Perspective

Recent scholarship from various disciplines investigates the topic of youth civic involvement. Some focuses on the longitudinal associations of various

types of civic activities (e.g., volunteering, campaigning, or attending a rally) with later civic outcomes (e.g., social attitudes and voting behavior). Overall, youth participation in various civic activities is associated with later civic outcomes (e.g., Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007; Verba et al., 1995) but the type, amount, and quality of participation is associated differentially with various outcomes (e.g., Flanagan, Gill, & Gallay, 2005; Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Metz & Youniss, 2005; Reinders & Youniss, 2006; Taylor & Pancer, 2007).

Other scholarship focuses on civic involvement as an outcome and documents what individual characteristics and contextual conditions are linked with civic involvement. Demographic characteristics such as age, race, SES, citizenship or immigrant status, and gender are important in predicting civic involvement (e.g., Cemalcilar, 2009; Foster-Bey, 2008; Levinson, 2007). Social attitudes such as a feeling that one belongs to their community, endorsing social responsibility (e.g., Cemalcilar, 2009), empathy for others (e.g., Penner, 2003), and feeling civic obligation (Matsuba, Hart, & Atkins, 2007) are associated with involvement in volunteer activities. Political and civic knowledge and skills are sometimes found to be important to civic involvement (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2001), although such knowledge is not sufficient to predict civic involvement and certainly does not guarantee or explain involvement (e.g., Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007).

Features of youth contexts also relate with civic involvement. For example, cultural practices (Yates & Youniss, 1998), family values and culture (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2007; Wray-Lake, 2008), and peer group values and activities (Pancer et al., 2007; Youniss, McLellan, & Mazer, 2001) are linked with civic involvement. In addition, neighborhood composition (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Hart & Kirshner, 2009) and school climate (Levinson, 2010; Torney-Purta, 2002) play a role in predicting how much youth become civically involved and in what ways. This research provides a basis for understanding the many characteristics and contexts that lead to or prevent youth civic involvement.

A major theme of recent research on youth civic involvement is that young people aren't provided with enough opportunities for civic participation. The level of opportunities presented by schools and neighborhoods is a key condition predicting youth involvement (Youniss & Levine, 2009). As such, the prevailing focus in developmental approaches to promoting civic development is on how adults in social institutions can structure opportunities to invite youth into civic life (e.g. Flanagan, 2009; Youniss & Levine, 2009). The logic is that without such opportunities, young people don't have an

entry point for participation in civic institutions and can't develop an orientation toward such civic participation.

Some scholars emphasize the importance of providing opportunities, especially for youth who are on the low end of the "civic achievement gap" (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levinson, 2007, 2010; Youniss & Levine, 2009). This gap refers to documented differences in youth civic involvement across socio-economic, racial, and ethnic groups in which poorer, minority, and non-college bound youth are less civically involved than wealthier, White, and college-bound youth (Levinson, 2007). Indeed, having opportunities narrows the gap in civic knowledge between demographic groups (Wilkenfeld, 2009). Whether directed at specific or broad groups of youth, the important idea that society must provide meaningful opportunities for youth engagement pervades civic research. Adolescents form civic commitments through experiences in social institutions (e.g., Hart & Kirshner, 2009; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008); creating civic opportunities for youth is integral for increasing youth civic involvement. However, providing civic opportunities to young people is not enough. Focusing only on creating opportunities does not answer the essential question of *why* youth become civically involved.

Motivation

Although much of the research reviewed above on youth civic development is concerned generally with the topic of how and why young people become civically involved, more direct investigation of individual differences in motivations for civic involvement among youth is needed. Focusing on individual characteristics to explore why youth are, or are not, civically involved is criticized as blaming young people for trends of decreasing civic involvement when the onus should be on society as a whole to provide opportunities and invitations for youth civic involvement (e.g., Youniss & Levine, 2009). However, it is necessary to understand what motivates youth to become civically involved initially—to accept these invitations into civic life. Further, within groups who have similar opportunities for involvement, what drives some young people, but not others, to be civically involved? And how are motivations similar or different for youth from different social contexts?

An impressive body of psychological research has been conducted to understand motivations for human behavior. Though a review of general motivational theories is beyond the scope of this article, at least two theories of motivation are worth mentioning as they have given rise to more recent and more specific theories of motivation in the domains of civic and political development. Kurt Lewin (1944/1951) is credited with a fundamental insight that behavior is a function of both internal psychological processes as well as

experiences (Snyder, 2009). Lewin understands motives as goal-directed forces related to one's values (Batson, Ahmad, & Tsang, 2002) and interacting with one's experiences. Thus, motivation is a dynamic interaction between values, goals, and experiences. This insight is very relevant to the domain of civic involvement as motivations for action directed toward one's community likely result from the interaction of both internal values (e.g., Penner, 2003) as well as from experiences (e.g., Rubin, 2007).

A second approach to understanding motivations in other psychological domains draws on the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic types of motivations (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This distinction is informative and certainly applies to civic involvement. Some suggest that youth are motivated to some extent by extrinsic or social rewards (e.g., Flanagan, 2009) such as building a resume. As a theoretical matter, the issue of requiring community service to promote civic engagement is contentious. Some suggest that emphasizing extrinsic motivators to civic involvement deters young people from making civic commitments (e.g., Warburton & Smith, 2003) though recent evidence suggests that mandating service does not necessarily decrease intrinsic motivations for service (Henderson, Brown, Pancer, & Ellis-Hale, 2007; Metz & Youniss, 2005). Though conceptually useful, the present study aims to go beyond the categorization of motivations as intrinsic and extrinsic to explore the substantive reasons and barriers that youth report for their involvements, and how such motivations and barriers arise from personal experiences, as Lewin (1944/1951) suggested.

What is known about motivations for civic involvement, specifically? Some research investigates civic motivations by working backwards from the meaning that might be derived from civic involvement and treating it as sources of motivation. Verba et al. (1995), in their comprehensive work on adult political and civic behavior, propose a civic volunteerism model in which the key components to understanding civic action are individual motivations, social processes of recruitment, and personal as well as institutional resources. The four motivations they propose are material gratifications, social gratifications, civic gratifications, and desire to influence collective policy. They find that motivations for civic activities (mostly political) vary but civic gratifications and desire to affect policy are the most frequently endorsed. They conclude that politically active adults are compelled by the gratification of contributing to society rather than material or social desires. In their conclusion to a special issue on youth civic development, Sherrod, Flanagan, and Youniss (2002) offered a different framework for conceptualizing motivations for youth civic involvement. They offer three main reasons for youth to be politically active: personal satisfaction, collective efficacy, and contributing to shared national values. These are three *outcomes* often

associated with civic involvement; however, they have not been tested directly as *motivations* for such involvement.

Despite a paucity of research understanding *civic* motivations, research in related fields provides insights about potential motivations for civic involvement. For example, work on motivational change through extracurricular activity involvement (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2002) such as in youth organizations (e.g., Pearce & Larson, 2006) suggests that youth are motivated toward extracurricular activities by the opportunity to meet certain needs. For example, needs such as showing or gaining competence and making or retaining social connections (Fredricks et al., 2002). This literature focuses on initial extrinsic motivations that develop into intrinsic motivations through organizational involvement. In fact, every young person in Pearce and Larson's (2006) study reported being motivated to join a youth activism organization in order to obtain community service hour credit, though many of their motivations changed over the course of participation—a process referred to by Colby and Damon (1992) as transformation of goals. Though such extrinsic motivations for civic involvements are certainly important for understanding youth decisions to participate in civic activities, what other motivations exist?

A body of literature from public administration research addresses the topic of what motivates adults toward public service. For example, Perry and Wise, (1990), and Perry, Brundey, Coursey, & Littlepage (2008) suggested the construct of public service motivation (PSM) as a disposition leading some individuals to public service. Similar to findings from youth civic engagement literature, some suggested antecedents to PSM include family socialization, religion, gender, income level, and earlier volunteer experiences (Perry et al., 2008). There is a substantial literature investigating motives for volunteerism specifically, especially among adults. Penner (2003) offered that personality traits such as helpfulness, empathy, and religiosity influence volunteer behavior and interact with experiences, such as organizational values and practices, to form and sustain civic involvements through role-formation. Omoto and Snyder (1995) proposed that three factors predict volunteer involvements: personality attributes, needs and motivations, and life circumstances. Such research points to the importance of recognizing internal motivations for civic involvement such as public service jobs and volunteerism, however such work focuses on adult civic involvement and aims at understanding how to recruit and maintain volunteers. This literature informs the investigation of youth civic motivations but much of this literature focuses on *adults* and not youth (e.g., Penner, 2003; Perry & Wise, 1990,), on motivational *change over time* (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2002; Pearce & Larson, 2006), or does not address motivations for *civic* involvement specifically (e.g., Pearce & Larson, 2006; Penner, 2003; Perry, 1990).

The present study extends such work with its focus on youth motivations for civic involvement.

Motivation in Context

Civic development is situated in social contexts and local institutions (Jahromi, 2011; Rubin, 2007). In her study of the civic experiences of youth in four schools with varying income levels and racial composition, Rubin (2007) found that young people develop their civic identities as reactions to their everyday experiences. Importantly, the experiences of a large segment of young people are characterized by negative interactions with civic institutions and individuals, such as teacher, social workers, and police officers. Rubin finds that the level of disjuncture or congruence between American ideals and the everyday experiences of young people in their own lives influences their developing civic identities. Using this conceptual framework, the present study extends to the area of motivation to examine how motivations for civic involvement might derive in response to youth's everyday experiences in the context of school, a particularly important context for civic development (e.g., Levinson, 2010; Rubin, 2007).

The present study adds to existing literature on youth civic involvement using a qualitative approach with a diverse sample of youth to identify broad categories of motivations and barriers to civic involvement. The research questions addressed are as follows:

Research Question 1: What motivations and barriers do youth report for their civic involvements; can meaningful categories of motivations and barriers be derived?

Research Question 2: Do different motivations and barriers emerge across school context (when school context is defined by the socioeconomic population served)?

Method

Qualitative approaches are useful to generate hypotheses in an understudied domain (Patton, 1990). Because relatively little is understood about what motivates some youth but not others toward civic involvement, exploring the topic through a qualitative study provides rich information. This study examines the perspective of young people on motivations and barriers to civic involvement and situates analysis within and across different school contexts.

Table 1. School Profiles.

	Higher SES		Lower SES	
	School A	School B	School C	School D
Number of students	1,949	1,191	1,943	332
Ethnic breakdown				
White	18%	45%	27%	<1%
Black	<1%	<1%	29%	58%
Hispanic	<1%	27%	29%	37%
Asian	76%	16%	15%	<1%
Other	6%	9%	<1%	6%
% FRL	5%	20%	47%	74%
4 year drop-out rate	1.20%	4.20%	9.70%	24.40%
% graduate yearly	99%	97%	87.60%	67.90%

Note. This information comes from the from the California Department of Education website, www.cde.ca.gov/ds. FRL = % free or reduced lunch.

Participants

Two interviewers conducted 22 interviews with youth between the ages of 16 and 18 years. Participants came from four schools that were chosen for their diverse populations. In an effort to investigate motivations from youth at schools on both ends of the "civic empowerment gap" (e.g., Levinson, 2010), two schools were chosen that serve higher socio-economic populations compared with the two other schools. A variety of indicators suggest that two of the schools served higher SES students (also called higher resourced schools) and two served lower SES students (referred to as lower resourced schools): graduation rate, rate of dropout, percent eligible for free or reduced lunch, and ethnic diversity (see Table 1 for school profiles). The ethnic diversity of participants in the present study across the higher and lower resourced schools differs; participants from Schools A and B are primarily from Chinese and Indian backgrounds, whereas in Schools C and D, participants are from mostly Mexican and Guatemalan backgrounds.

Our sampling approach involved asking someone at each school (e.g., the principal, an administrative assistant to the principal, or a school counselor) to choose four to five seniors for us to interview. We provided them with a very basic description of our study. We asked our contact to identify one student who was highly involved in civic activities (loosely following the "exemplar" approach; see Colby & Damon, 1992; Damon, 2008) and to choose three to four additional students who were not as civically involved;

this was to ensure a range of civic involvement within each school. We believe that one school (School A) chose several highly involved students, so we asked to interview three additional students at this school who were not as civically involved. We wanted to interview youth from diverse ethnic backgrounds so this was also considered in recruitment. The final sample consisted of 19 high school seniors (ages 17-18 years) and three students in Grades 10 and 11. Four of the 22 participants were not born in the United States and 15 students had at least one parent who was not born in the United States.

Interview Procedure

After following appropriate consent and assent procedures, interviews were conducted over the course of 2 months. We used an in-depth semi-structured approach to interviewing and each interview took between 45 minutes and 2 hours, with most lasting 1 hour. The interview was developed, piloted, and practiced through multiple iterations by our research team.

Two interviewers followed a script of open-ended and follow-up probe questions. In the portion of the interview relevant to this study, we were interested in motivations and barriers for civic involvements. Sample questions are "Tell me about yourself, what kinds of activities are you involved in" and later in the interview "Has there ever been anything at your school that you thought should change? Did you have the opportunity to do something about it?" We followed up with asking how and why they became involved in different civic activities.

Analysis

Our research team conducted a series of steps to identify the themes emerging from this set of interviews, to create a coding system, and to draw conclusions from these data. Our analysis was guided by general research questions regarding the nature of motivations for youth civic involvement, but we aimed to capture the themes and ideas that emerged in the words of our respondents. To meet these goals, we used both theory-based content analysis methods (Weber, 1990) and open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We used an iterative process of reading interview transcripts, identifying themes, and discussing how the themes related to our research questions and hypotheses. During an initial analysis phase, four researchers read the interviews and identified quotes illuminating our research questions. Each coder developed an independent list of data points from the interviews for the categories of interest. We repeated these steps until we agreed on our final categories of

Table 2. Motivations and Barriers by School.

	Higher SES schools		Lower SES schools	
	School A	School B	School C	School D
n	8	5	4	5
Motivations: Primary (secondary)				
Issues	0(3)	0(0)	1(1)	5(0)
Beliefs	3(0)	1(1)	2(0)	0(1)
Self-goals	3(3)	1(1)	0(1)	0(0)
Response	2(0)	1(0)	0(0)	0(0)
Barriers				
Personal	4	2	2	1
Systemic	3	0	1	3

Note. The numbers of motivations may not add up to the sample size within school if there were students who were not civically involved. Barriers may not add up to the sample size because students could have been coded as discussing *both* the barriers, or neither of the barriers.

motivations. Finally, two coders—one who had been involved in the previous phase and one who had not—independently coded for each participant's primary and secondary civic motivations. Coding independently, the coders reached agreement on 17 out of the 22 interviews for *primary* motivations, and had coded the same two categories for primary and secondary motivations but swapped the position of codes for two of the five reaching 86% agreement. Through discussion they came to agreement on the primary and secondary motivations for all participants reaching 100% agreement. In addition, each coder made a list of each type of involvement mentioned by the youth and any barriers to involvement.

Results

Overall, youth varied widely in the extent of their civic involvement, the types of civic activities they were involved in, and the motivations they reported (see Table 2 for a summary of motivations and barriers). Four categories of motivations and two types of barriers emerged from these interviews. Results are organized by the categories of motivations that emerged: issues/causes, beliefs about civic action, self-goals, and response to an invitation. The first category, *personal issue or cause* motivations capture specific civic issues or causes youth were passionate about. In the second category, *beliefs*, motivations were expressed as beliefs about the importance of civic action. The third category,

self-goals, were motivations relating to some form of self-enhancement, and the fourth category, *response to an invitation*, were motivations stemming from being invited into civic involvement by another individual or group. In the following section, types of motivation are described with examples and then the prevalence of motivation types by context is reported. Following that, barriers are reported with examples and prevalence by context. All students cited in this article have been assigned pseudonyms.

Categories of Motivation

Issue or cause. The six youth coded as having personal issues or causes as their primary motivator described becoming motivated for civic involvement by passion about a specific issue or a personally relevant cause. Their involvements seemed to be in response to community needs the youth identified with or to personal issues that affected them in specific ways. These motivations varied in terms of how personal and how dramatic the issues were. Although the target of the motivating issues differed, this motivation had a similar specific and localized quality to it.

For example, one young woman, Angela from School D, was moved to protest police brutality after a family member of hers was shot by the police. Speaking about a protest she was involved in, Angela reported,

> . . . it was called "Stop the Violence" And we walked [far] . . . I didn't know Joe, but the fact that he got killed by an officer, that just made me want to do it. Because the police killed my cousin, so every time I have a way of getting in a protest that got to do with an officer, I'm there.

Angela's involvement in protest activities is motivated by a very personal event in her life. Her response is emotional and specific to the issue of police brutality and abuse of power rather than motivated by a general sense that protesting is a productive civic action. One young man, Evan who is also from School D, is motivated by the issues he sees in his community

> Well, living here, I see things. I see violence. I see change. [City] has a lot of history of change, of people that resist, and take action, and that inspires me to be more like them. I was part of plenty of organizations . . . I wanted to make change in the community, and wanted to teach all youth the history that's not being taught at schools like ethnic studies, that kind of stuff.

Though less traumatic than the examples above, two youth in this sample, Ben and Luis (both from School C) became involved with civic

activities when they were faced with the possibility that their water polo team would not receive funding (Ben was coded as primarily motivated by issues and Luis as secondarily motivated by issues). Both were compelled to join together to write letters and attend school board meetings. Luis reported " . . . the school board recently was talking about shutting down the pool for water polo. And I had to go to some of the school board meetings to protest that." Through his passion for water polo and in response to it being threatened, he became involved in a variety of civic activities to combat the threat of losing his team. It is not likely that he would attend school board meetings out of a general desire to learn about the democratic process, rather, he had a specific and meaningful reason to attend meetings. Luis is an example of someone who undergoes the process of transformation of goals whereby his initial motivation, saving his water polo team, is the impetus for action, but through his exposure to political processes, his civic activities and goals expand into being a more informed civic actor. For example, he explains,

> . . . Experiences have shaped me. Like they were—the school board recently was talking about shutting down the pool for water polo. And I had to go to some of the school board meetings to protest that. But at the school board meetings I was paying attention to how the members acted and just how they seemed to react to different—'cause I had to sit through more than just mine to get to where my issue—to get to our issue, so I saw how they act on different issues. And on the November election, I was able to vote.

The types of involvements associated with this motivation category were often political (e.g., protesting, attending political group meetings, petitioning) though the type of involvement also seemed to depend on the context and types of opportunities available. All six of the young people interviewed who were motivated primarily by an issue were from the less resourced schools. For some youth, the initial motivation was personal but through exposure to civic processes, they became involved in other activities while for others, their involvement only centered on the personal issue and did not lead to interest in other issues.

Beliefs about the importance of civic action. Contrasting with the *issue-driven* youth, the six youth in this group described their motivations in more general terms expressing the belief that civic involvement itself is important. These beliefs were usually not reliant on a passionate connection to their particular civic involvements; rather, the particular issues were not nearly as important as the fact that they were acting on their beliefs about civic action. Examples typical of this type of motivation include expressions of personal commitment to give back. For example, Michelle (School A) reports that "I really

like to give back to my community, and it's something that I've been kind of doing mainly since freshman year." Others, such as Maria (School C) report a belief in general social responsibility:

> I do [feel that I have responsibilities as a citizen] because everybody does, I feel like we have to do our part in our community, and our community does their part in our state, and it just goes on to our whole country.

Christy from School B explained that

> I'm a believer of if you have a lot, and you are able to give back, you should make the world better for everybody because it'll enter and come back to you in a certain way, whether it be helping the economy of the country you live in or just self-satisfaction or something like that.

For many youth expressing this primary motivation, the target of their "giving back" or wanting to "do their part" was not the motivational focus but sometimes seemed incidental.

Four of the six youth coded as having *beliefs* as their primary motivation were from the highly resourced school contexts; two were from the less resourced schools. One of the two belief-driven youth from the lower resourced schools conveyed belief motivation in combination with issue-driven motivation; this was true for one of the youth in the highly resourced schools.

Self-goals. There were four youth coded as being primarily motivated toward civic involvement by personal goals or self-interests. They expressed a range of goals related to self-enhancement in some way, for example, personal development, preparing for their future, gaining skills or knowledge, building a resume, or becoming better informed. This category overlaps in some ways to the idea of extrinsic motivation or social rewards in existing literature on civic engagement (Flanagan, 2009). Importantly, in this sample, these motivations were always present in combination with other-oriented motivations (such as beliefs about civic action or specific issues of concern) so it is difficult to tease apart which is the primary motivator and these should not be considered as exclusively extrinsic.

One emergent self-goal motivation was the desire to prepare for the future; civic involvement was important for personal development. For example, Maya (School A) explained,

> [My involvement in an organization] started off as more personal, like being able to develop as a leader, being able to be exposed to different types of

knowledge, different types of people . . . So it's really an exciting opportunity to me, and—to really try to impact people in different ways.

Others were more specifically focused on civic involvement as instrumental for future goals such as going to college. For example, Kim (School A) said "Me and my friends kinda wanted to start on summer programs for college, so we looked around, and then [my friend] told me about it." Kim reported that certain experiences would help build her college resume, but she was also aware that she could grow as a person through such experiences. When asked by her interviewer "So initially, it was for college, you wanted to get some experiences like that?" she answered "Yeah, and also for myself, as well, too—learn and grow to become a better person." Kim expressed multiple related self-goals.

All four of these youth coded as having *self-goals* as a primary motivator were from the more highly resourced schools. The students who were motivated by self-goals were also motivated by *beliefs* or *issues* and they tended to be highly involved in activities such as political youth organizations, and service-oriented summer internships and youth programs. One participant, Ben, from a lower resourced school (School C) who was coded as having *self-goals* as secondary motivations wanted to address specific issues that affected him as well as others: lobbying to keep a sports team. This goal was more immediate than the future-oriented *self-goals* of youth from the schools with higher resources. Many of the youth reporting self-goals as one of their motivations also expressed that their goals changed through their civic involvements. This concept, which Colby and Damon (1992) call transformation of goals, is well documented in youth civic involvement literature and provides compelling support for the notion that getting youth involved, for any reason, has positive implications on their civic development (e.g., Youniss et al., 1997).

Response to an invitation. Three young people were categorized as being motivated for civic involvement in response to an invitation or pressure from others. Examples of this include helping a friend or being asked by an adult. The youth reporting this motivation were not necessarily connected to the specific issue and didn't express beliefs that civic involvement is important, rather that someone asked for their help and so they got involved.

Ian (School A) mentioned participating in a fund raiser to "help out a friend" but did not elaborate the importance of the activity. Kate (School B) responded to a speaker at her school:

Well . . . I did this one thing where we went door-to-door and we informed people about how to save energy and how to become more green. We were

given the packages of information to give to them and then we were kinda told what to say and stuff like that . . . There was a speaker who came to our school, and she told us about it, and asked for volunteers to help.

The youth in this category were not particularly compelled by specific issues and they did not express any ideological beliefs attached to their participation. Interestingly, they did not discuss the same transformation of goals through their civic involvement that youth with self-goals reported. Perhaps responding to requests doesn't lead to the same level of commitment to civic involvements as other motivations. Or, youth who reported this motivation might have become involved in one-time events rather than sustained involvement.

All three youth coded as primarily motivated by responding to an invitation from others came from the more highly resourced schools. Because we did not ask participants directly if someone had ever asked them to participate in a civic activity, it is possible that this motivation is under-represented in the present data.

Barriers to Civic Involvement

In addition to coding the four motivation categories above, barriers to civic involvement were coded. Both *personal* and *systemic* barriers were noted in the interviews. *Personal* barriers describe reasons such as youth don't have a strong interest in being civically involved, for example, because they lack interest, feel complacent, or describe ideological opposition to civic involvement. These were especially evident for youth in highly resourced schools. *Systemic* barriers describe youth who feel that they can't be civically involved, for example, because they lack the opportunities, resources, experience, or knowledge. Youth in low resourced schools discussed *personal* barriers as well as *systemic* ones.

Personal barriers. Among the reasons for civic non-involvement reported by youth, some lacked the motivators listed above, for example, they did not have a specific issue of interest, or believed that things are fine without personal civic participation. There were nine youth who were coded as reporting *personal* barriers to civic involvement; six were from highly resourced schools and three were from lower resourced schools. Many of the uninvolved youth reported not taking part in civic activities because it was not a priority for them considering their other commitments. Another *personal* barrier was a sense of complacency, the thought that one's civic involvement was unnecessary. For example, Ian (School A) reported "I don't really see

anything in my community that I don't like. It's a safe neighborhood. There's not lots of crime" and went on to explain his awareness of some problems that don't relate to him

> . . . because I don't think I'm personally aware of what it's like to live without health care. I can't relate to what it's like without health care, so I don't see to the extent of how big of a deal it is.

Thus, he doesn't have issue-specific or belief-driven motivation for civic involvement.

Many youth who were not involved in civic activities reported that they saw the value in civic involvement even if they did not participate in civic activities due to various barriers. However, one uninvolved youth, John (School B) chose not to participate in civic activities for an ideological reason: belief in the importance of taking care of oneself. John reported that

> . . . people should look out for themselves first and not necessarily others . . . it's OK to put yourself first and be entirely concerned with yourself, and that shouldn't be looked down upon as selfish, or even if it is called selfish, the word "selfish" or "greedy" shouldn't be too frowned upon . . . the amount of times I've been asked to help others, and when I'm asked to help do a project in leadership, I have to think, "Well, do I have time for that?" And I sometimes feel bad about saying, "No, I don't have the time for that," even though, to me, I'm doing the best for myself.

Interestingly, some of the youth who were very involved in one form of civic activity mentioned barriers to other forms. For example, Michelle (School A) who actively volunteers described a barrier to political forms of civic involvement by commenting that she is not that type of person. When asked to explain, she reported,

> I'm timid. I would never be able to lead a group on that large of a scale . . . or I don't know if I would be able to take the responsibility . . . I don't know how to explain it, but stereotypically, we just see leaders as strong, charismatic individuals, and I just have never really thought about myself like that.

Though motivations for volunteering and political involvement are treated similarly for the purpose of the present study, it is important to note that motivations might differ by specific types of involvement. Overall, youth who were civically involved at different levels reported a variety of *personal* barriers keeping them from participating more or from participating in other types of activities, or from participating at all.

Systemic barriers. Another set of barriers that emerged were more systemic than personal; they were presented as less of a personal choice than the personal barriers. Youth reporting these types of barriers usually expressed some desire to be civically involved but felt that they lacked the opportunities, time, resources, experience, power, or knowledge to do so. There were seven youth who were coded as reporting *systemic* barriers to civic involvement; three were from highly resourced schools and four were from lower resourced schools. Some barriers reported, such as lack of opportunities, are well documented in other research. Other *systemic* barriers were lack of time, knowledge, and power. Through these interviews, it is clear that such *systemic* barriers are not simple roadblocks to civic involvement; rather, these barriers are perceived by youth as convincing reasons why their participation is unwelcome or futile. Beyond the fact that opportunities were not available, some youth seemed to perceive the lack of opportunities as evidence that they cannot, or should not bother with civic involvement.

Many youth report not having time for civic involvement, while others youth wish they could become involved but don't know how. For example, Christina (School D) reports that " . . . there's things around that I see that I wish were better, but I wouldn't really know how to make them better." She doesn't know where to begin addressing problems she sees in her community. Others feel too young to influence civic life. For example John (School B) said "I don't think there's much a minor can do," so they conclude that there is no point in trying. Some youth reported feelings of disempowerment, a barrier that fits both labels of personal and systemic. For example when asked about taking civic action, Angela (School D) reported "No, 'cause they ain't gonna listen to me, so I'm not about to waste my breath on people that ain't gonna listen. Or they might sit there and listen but ain't gonna do nothing about it." This disempowerment was more evident in interviews of youth from the schools with fewer resources, but was expressed by youth at the highly resourced schools also.

Discussion

The first research question of the present study was "What motivations do youth report for their civic involvements?" Four categories emerged that reflect different motivations for civic involvement. The most common primary motivators were *personal issues or causes, beliefs* about the importance of civic involvement, and *self-oriented goals*. Though the primary motivations of each youth were fairly clear from the language and anecdotes the youth discussed, the motivations are related and certainly occur in combination. Youth are likely motivated to civic action by more than one drive.

Some of the emergent categories of civic motivation are similar to those proposed by previous work. For example, some of the self-goals from this study are extrinsic motivations (Deci & Ryan, 1985), such as building one's resume. Other self-goals from the present study are similar to personal satisfaction motives (Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002), such as joining an activity because it made participants feel good about themselves. In contrast to the prevailing idea in youth civic engagement research about increasing youth civic involvement by providing more opportunities, the category of motivations *responses to an invitation* was the least frequently reported in this study. However, this may be underrepresented due to the nature of the present interview that didn't ask directly if an invitation or opportunity had been presented. Indeed, in other research, responding to invitations can be a fruitful route into civic involvement (Youniss & Levine, 2009) perhaps leading to sustained involvement through goal transformation. It is likely that responding to an invitation or opportunity for civic involvement facilitates youth civic involvement in combination with other motivations.

The most compelling contribution that emerged in terms of categories of civic motivations is the distinction between *beliefs about civic involvement* and *personal issues and causes* motivations. This distinction has not emerged in research on youth civic engagement; however, broader psychological theories suggesting that internal states drive human behavior are relevant to understand this. For example, Damon's (2008) work on purpose suggests the importance of youth's internal beliefs as driving motivators and organizers of behavior. The category of personal issues and causes builds on work, for example, Rubin (2007), emphasizing how personal experiences provide the context for action.

The second question of this research relates motivations to school context (defined by socioeconomic population served by the schools) by asking, how do youth-reported motivations vary across school context? Given existing research suggesting that level of opportunities for youth to participate in civic life is linked with higher levels civic involvement (e.g., Flanagan, 2008; Youniss & Levine, 2009), it was expected that youth in the more highly resourced schools would report more opportunities for involvement, for example, through school clubs and community opportunities. Indeed, this was true; the only three youth reporting response to an invitation motivation came from the more highly resourced schools.

Two approaches are helpful to understand how motivations for civic involvement are tied to school context beyond the opportunities available. First, looking at motivations *across* the groups helps understand if and how motivations vary by context. Second, looking at variation *within* each context addresses the question, given similar opportunities for civic involvement,

what motivations differentiate youth who are civically involved from those who are not?

Looking at these findings by comparing motivations across contexts reveals differences. Many youth from the highly resourced schools expressed beliefs and self-goals motivating their civic involvement. It is not possible to discern from this study whether this is due to features of the schools, communities, or families of students at these schools; however, it seems that many youth in these two schools who were civically involved were being socialized to believe in the importance of civic involvement. For some, this came from beliefs about "giving back" and "contributing to community" while for others, the emphasis was on preparing for the future role of citizen. Though some of the youth in the more highly resourced schools reported a specific issue that was important to them, their primary motivations seemed to be the idea of addressing issues through civic action, rather than actual issues.

In contrast, more youth from the lower resourced schools were motivated frequently by specific issues and less by generalized beliefs about civic involvement. It is suggested that youth from schools with lower resources have fewer opportunities for civic participation (Hart & Atkins, 2002). Perhaps especially in the absence of numerous opportunities, specific and personal issues are what motivate youth. It is also possible that youth in the more highly resourced contexts perceive fewer social issues of personal relevance. The youth from schools with fewer resources seemed to be reacting to personal situations or to problems they identified in their community. Many youth programs, especially with youth in lower resourced contexts, capitalize on youth reactions to social inequalities and channel such reactions into civic involvement. Flanagan (2009) offered that "these projects harness young people's frustrations and direct their anger toward social change." Many schools take an active role in civic socialization for young people; many schools do purposeful work around issues of civic education and have distinct approaches (e.g., Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, & Gallay, 2007; Hess, 2009). Perhaps the culture of the lower resourced schools emphasized civic participation for making change. Future work can illuminate how school culture facilitates civic socialization.

Youth civic involvement takes different forms for various groups of youth (e.g., Flanagan, 2008; Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernández, 2003; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002; Sherrod, Flanagan, Kassimir, & Syvertsen, 2005) and specific experiences in social contexts situate civic development (Rubin, 2007). The present study adds that motivations might also differ according to various contexts of youth development. Understanding variation in motivations offers a new way to understand *why* demographic characteristics are

associated with different levels and forms of civic involvement. In terms of addressing the "civic gap" between youth in higher and lower SES contexts, the most prominent current suggestion in the civic literature is that more opportunities are needed to invite all youth, but especially youth from lower socioeconomic contexts, into civic life (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levinson, 2007, Youniss & Levine, 2009). However, to close the civic gap, it is necessary to attend as well to potential differences in what motivates youth and the relations between opportunities, motivations, and context.

It is also revealing to look *within* school contexts to examine patterns of youth civic motivations. For example, the "unexpected cases" of youth who were highly involved despite attending less resourced schools with few opportunities (such as Evan) and youth who were uninvolved despite high levels of resources and civic opportunities (such as Kate). Beyond opportunities, beliefs and passions distinguish levels of civic involvement. For example, Evan's passion for representing his cultural background led to his active civic involvement, despite his experience that his school did not provide opportunities for such cultural representation. In the schools with many civic opportunities such as civic clubs and community partnerships, uninvolved youth, such as Kate, reported neither belief about civic involvement nor passion about specific issues. Providing additional opportunities is not enough to engage these young people in civic life. What is needed to increase their civic involvement is endorsement of general beliefs regarding civic involvement or for their passions to be stirred by personally interesting and meaningful issues. Young people can be encouraged to form beliefs about, for example, giving back, representing one's culture, fighting for rights, or preparing for productive citizenship. Youth can also be encouraged to find specific issues about which they are passionate (e.g., Flanagan, 2008; Sherrod, 2003). This requires skilled mentors to be attuned to sparks of interest youth show that might be nurtured into action (e.g., Damon, 2008). Both beliefs and passions are internal sources of motivation deriving from context that, when more fully understood, can be tapped into to increase youth civic involvement. Not having opportunities is certainly a barrier to civic involvement, but having opportunities does not guarantee involvement. The recommendations in this article for understanding and targeting motivational dimensions should work in concert with recommendations for structuring more civic opportunities for youth. To engage youth effectively, opportunities can be provided in ways that capitalize on existing youth motivations.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations to this study. The sample is not representative of youth in the United States and the findings are meant to generate ideas rather

than to test hypotheses. For example, our sample from one of the more highly resourced schools was comprised of mostly Asian students; this reflects the composition of the school in our study but may limit the generalizability of findings to all highly resourced schools. Motivations are complex and multi-dimensional; young people have multiple motivations that work together in complex ways not easily separated. The motivational categories offered here are intentionally broad; further research should specify the content of both beliefs and issues that motivate civic involvement. The categorization of schools as "highly resourced" and "less resourced" according to demographics was an attempt to identify how motivations and barriers are situated within social contexts; however, labeling schools should be done with caution and future work should carefully determine what school characteristics are relevant to civic involvement.

Future research can expound on the idea found in the present study that initial motivations differ from motivations that sustain civic involvement and should address what types of motivation lead to sustained civic involvement over time. Which motivations predict sustained involvement will undoubtedly rely on subsequent experiences (Taylor & Pancer, 2007).

Finally, future research must address whether motivations and barriers for explicitly political versus community service–oriented civic involvements differ. Motivations and barriers for these two types of civic involvement likely differ, though both may stem from needs to contribute to society or to address civic issues. Future research should explore links between motivations and barriers. What barriers are strong enough to prevent motivated youth from civic involvement? What motivators are strong enough to lead to involvement in the face of barriers?

Conclusion

These interviews illuminate examples of motivations and barriers for youth civic involvement. Knowing what motivates youth, and especially those with varying levels of civic opportunity, adds to the understanding of civic development processes and has potential practical implications for facilitating civic involvement among youth. Youth have various beliefs, concerns, desires, and interests leading them toward or away from civic involvement. The perspective of motivation has been left out of understanding civic development; it is necessary to consider the nuanced experiences motivating youth civic involvement as research on civic development moves forward. Adult educators and mentors who can recognize the beliefs and interests of youth will be more successful in structuring civic opportunities that provide a way for them to engage with and develop those beliefs. Understanding and capitalizing on the reasons why

youth are initially attracted to civic involvement can help facilitate broader and deeper involvement among diverse youth.

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Author Biography

Parissa J. Ballard is a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health and Society Scholar at University of California, San Francisco, and University of California, Berkeley. She obtained her PhD in developmental and psychological sciences from the Stanford University Graduate School of Education. Her research focuses on understanding the processes involved in positive youth development.