Millennials: Shifting Values and Influences for Civic Engagement

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Civic engagement is a complex field of study covering a spectrum of activities and is well-documented, especially among the millennial generation. Individuals of Generation Y, also referred to as millennials, are quickly approaching the point of becoming members of the largest living adult generation. Past research has indicated what motivates an individual to initiate civic engagement, but motivators that cause one to get involved civically often are not the same reasons that sustain civic engagement. However, getting on the pathway to civic engagement is a critical step to becoming an active and engaged citizen. To gain a better understanding of factors that initiate engagement, this study was conducted with a sample of millennials (n = 159) participating in 13 service-learning classes at a public land grant university. This report shares results from that study examining the values and influences of several possible “initiating factors” for civic engagement using Pancer’s (2015) Integrative Theory of Civic Engagement.

Keywords: civic engagement, influence, millennials, parents

Introduction

Civic engagement involves a wide spectrum of activities (Lopez, Levine, Both, Kiesa, Kirby, & Marcelo, 2006), such as attending a local city council meeting, volunteering for community service, fundraising for a charity, or participating in a demonstration or protest march. Each civic engagement activity has an intended outcome, whether it is designed to create awareness of an issue, help solve a local problem, or influence a decision (Levine, 2013). There are various forms and types of civic engagement, with voting being the most easily measured and identifiable (Levine, 2013). Civic engagement can be a complex act and is a well-documented field of study, especially among millennials (Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeter, 2003; Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement [CIRCLE], 2012, 2016; Flanagan, Syversten, & Stout, 2007; Gilman & Stokes 2014; Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2007).

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2019), the term millennial is used to define a broad generation of individuals born between the early 1980s and 2000s with the year 2000 as the upper limit for the millennial generation. This generation is also often referred to as Generation Y. The millennial generation has experienced significant technological advances,
including widespread use of the Internet, electronic tablets, smartphones, and the use of social media (Goodwin-Jones, 2005). In addition to technological advances, this generation has also experienced significant global changes, including domestic and global terrorism, the Great Recession, and climate change (Gilman & Stokes, 2014). These monumental shifts, regarding how one views the world and how one interacts within the world, has given rise to a generation that has been studied, analyzed, and written about more than any other generation and is projected to be the nation’s largest living adult generation in the coming years (Fry, 2018).

This report shares the results of a study conducted with millennials at one public land grant university in the state of Nevada to examine what values and influences might motivate a millennial individual to first get involved in civic activities. Influences that first get one involved are defined as Initiating Factors in Pancer’s Integrative Theory of Civic Engagement (2015, p. 17), and represent the first step in this broader theoretical framework. Results from this study provide an investigation into the possible significance of three identified initiating factors for civic engagement among this studied group of millennials.

**Engagement Spectrum Among Millennials**

Civic Engagement is frequently defined through Ehrlich’s (2000) narrative as:

> working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivations to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes (p. vi).

Pancer (2015) takes the definition of civic engagement one step further and frames engagement in the context of community behaviors, which includes a “broad set of behaviors that link individuals to others in their community and serve to enhance community life” (p. 20).

The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) developed the most comprehensive construct instrument to measure civic engagement with their Civic and Political Health Survey (Flanagan et al., 2007; Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002; Lopez et al., 2006). This survey contains 19 items related to engagement, which are divided into three activities: 1) Civic Activities, 2) Electoral Activities, and 3) Political Voice Activities. The spectrum of engagement activities includes such items as: community problem-solving, volunteering, persuasion, protesting, boycotting, buycotting (i.e., the opposite of boycotting, whereby a person chooses to buy certain products from a company due to support for the company’s values or policies), fundraising, voting, contacting officials, etc. (Flanagan et al., 2007; Keeter et al., 2002; Lopez et al., 2006).

According to the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC, 2013), millennials are the highest users of social media for civic purposes, including promoting political material as well as
encouraging others to civically act. Millennials are also the most ethnically and racially diverse than any other population (NCoC, 2013).

Another key difference of millennials, compared to previous generations, is their level of engagement in the community. Millennials engage in community involvement activities at higher rates than previous generations and prefer community engagement activities such as volunteering, helping a neighbor, or working to solve a community problem over traditional political avenues to bring about change (CIRCLE, 2016). While indicators provide an important context of the spectrum of civic engagement and answer the question how people engage, indicators do not tell the full story of what influences people to engage. The purpose of this study is to explore some initiating factors that influence and give rise to civic engagement among millennials.

“Initiating Factors”: One Step in the Integrative Theory of Civic Engagement

Previous research has provided strong evidence on how values and motivations for civic engagement are shaped and influenced by parental habits and families (Andolina et al., 2003; Kelly, 2006; Pancer & Pratt, 1999); involvement in youth clubs (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Flanagan et al., 2007; Mustillo, Wilson, & Lynch, 2004; Pancer et al., 2007); participation in church and school service programs (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Karpini, 2006); and participation in service-learning programs (Astin & Sax 1998; Haber-Curran & Stewart, 2015; Moely, Furco, & Reed, 2008; Moely, Mercer, Ilustre, Miron, & McFarland, 2002; Spencer, Cox-Petersen, & Crawford, 2005). Additionally, research has provided evidence that what parents discuss at home has a direct influence on children’s connection to their community (McIntosh, Hart, & Youniss, 2007). Peers also have a significant influence on one’s motivation and attitude for engagement (Zaff, Boyd, Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2008; Zaff, Malanchuk, & Eccles, 2008).

Pancer and his colleagues (Pancer, 2015; Pancer & Pratt, 1999; Pancer et al., 2007) built upon previous research on civic engagement to form the Integrative Theory of Civic Engagement (Pancer, 2015). The Integrative Theory of Civic Engagement is a theoretical framework that explores potential pathways to engagement, as well as factors that sustain engagement and outcomes from engagement (Pancer, 2015). The Integrative Theory of Civic Engagement is a “conceptual framework that attempts to integrate these forms of engagement.” (Pancer, 2015, p.15). In this framework, Pancer identifies initial pathways for engagement as initiating factors. These initiating factors are what get people involved, although initiating factors are not the same factors that sustain engagement (Pancer, 2015). Pancer’s Integrated Theory of Civic Engagement (2015) contains four components: 1) Initiating Factors, 2) Sustaining/Inhibitory Factors, 3) Civic Engagement Acts, and 4) Outcomes.

According to Pancer (2015), the process of civic engagement occurs on two levels: 1) the Individual Level and 2) the System Level. The Integrative Theory of Civic Engagement
assimilates both levels across the progressive stages of engagement. Examples of Individual Level initiating factors include items such as social influence, individual values, and motives. For example, a person may become involved in community service due to “the influence of a parent or teacher.” (Pancer, 2015, p. 16). Individual values may also be linked to social justice values. Instrumental motives for engagement may stem from a personal benefit, for example, adding to one’s resume for entrance into college. Examples of System Level initiating factors include external forces in the community, such as participation in community service programs, youth service clubs, and service-learning activities and programs (Pancer, 2015).

After the Initiating Factors component, Pancer’s (2015) Integrative Theory of Civic Engagement progresses to outline the component of Sustaining/Inhibitory Factors. These factors include both positive and negative experiences. For example, if the individual had a positive engagement experience and if the individual had a positive social environment, these would create Sustaining Factors for the individual to progress along the Integrative Theory of Civic Engagement and continue involvement with community organizations and engagement in social issues. However, if the individual had a negative engagement experience and did not feel their civic activity was supported, these Inhibitory Factors may end the individual’s continuation in civic engagement activities (Pancer, 2015, p.16). Positive experiences are considered Sustaining Factors and lead to the third component of the Integrative Theory of Civic Engagement model, Civic Engagement (i.e., acts of engagement), such as political activity and social activism, as well as collective action, such as local governing boards or social movements. The final component of the Integrative Theory of Civic Engagement model is Outcomes. Outcomes include both Individual Level results, such as enhancing a sense of efficacy and skill development and System Level outcomes, for example, social change, social capital, and strengthened democracy.

The researcher in this study set out to operationalize some easily identifiable initiating factors and to examine both Individual and System Level variables to determine if any of the initiating factors for civic engagement included in this study contributed to differences in participants’ valuation of civic engagement. The specific research objective of this study involved examining the first component of the Integrative Theory of Civic Engagement (i.e., Initiating Factors) to assess if any of the initiating factors included in the study contributed to significant differences in the participants’ perceptions of the value of civic engagement in the community (Figure 1). For the purpose of this study, three initiating factors, as depicted in Figure 1, were operationalized as follows:

- One Individual Level Variable reflecting “values” in this study was operationalized by whether or not a student’s parents discussed current events in the home.
- Two System Level Variables were represented in this study by 1) whether or not the student had participated in youth clubs and 2) whether or not the student had participated in a service-learning course prior to the current course.
Methodology

Participants in this study included students enrolled in service-learning classes at a public land-grant university. Students in a total of thirteen service-learning classes were invited to participate in an online survey. The researcher estimated that there were approximately 25 students per class, rendering an estimated total sample size of 325 students invited to participate in the on-line survey. Participation in the survey was completely voluntary and declining to participate had no impact on a student’s grade. The research protocol was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) to analyze and publish results. Students accessed the survey as part of their class assessment prior to beginning their service-learning experience.

To set up an exploratory study designed to operationalize three initiating factors, the model as proposed by Pancer (2015) was modified by simplifying and examining only one component of the theory, Initiating Factors, rather than testing all four of the model’s components. To examine what factors might influence people to get involved in civic engagement in the community, three independent variables were selected to examine their relationships with the dependent variable, a student’s reported perception of the value of civic engagement. The three independent variables were: involvement with a youth service club, participation in prior service-learning courses, and parental discussion of current events in the home. All independent variables had a dichotomous
response of Yes or No. The actual questions in the online survey for the three independent variables were:

- I was involved in a civic/service organization as a youth (i.e., scouts, 4-H, etc.). (Yes/No) *(Youth Service Club Involvement)*
- I have participated in a service-learning course prior to this class (Yes/No) *(Participation in Prior Service-Learning Course)*
- My parents would frequently discuss current events in our home (Yes/No) *(Parent Discussed Current Events in Home)*

Pancer (2015) stated that a “wide range of research methodologies is necessary and important to gain a full understanding of civic engagement” (p.20). Additionally, scales that measure civic engagement that encompass more than civic behaviors are lacking in the literature (Zaff et al., 2010). Researchers have identified and created valid and reliable measures of civic attitudes and skills (Moely et al., 2002), civic duty and social responsibility (Zaff et al., 2010) and civic measurement models (Flanagan et al., 2007), an index of civic and political engagement (Andolina et al., 2003, Levine & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2010), and community service attitudes (Shiarella, McCarthy, & Tucker, 2000). However, a reliable and valid scale to measure the value of civic engagement in the community is lacking in the literature. To compensate for the lack of a scale, the researcher identified five questions previously used in the literature to represent a composite measure for the dependent variable, the student’s perceived value of civic engagement in the community.

The civic engagement questions were taken from previously used questions in the literature with slight wording modifications (Table 1). The civic engagement scale was created to reflect a student’s perceived value of civic engagement in the community that reflects attitudes for civic engagement (Table 1). Questions were selected that comprise attitudes and values of civic engagement, such as a sense of personal responsibility, civic and community service attitudes, and a sense of civic efficacy.

Response categories for the five questions were based on a Likert-type scale of 1-8 (from 1 = *very strongly disagree* to 8 = *very strongly agree*). This created a possible total scale score for a student’s perceived value of civic engagement that ranged from 5 to 40. The questions asked on the survey, with the corresponding original question from the literature and the literature source, are outlined in Table 1.
Table 1. Measures that Comprised the Civic Engagement Perceived Value Scale with the Original Question and the Literature Source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Original Question in Literature</th>
<th>Literature Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I want to help others in need.</td>
<td>“I try to help others in need.”</td>
<td>Personal Responsibility Citizen Survey (Flanagan et al., 2007; Westheimer &amp; Kahne, 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am involved in my community.</td>
<td>“I plan to become involved in my community.”</td>
<td>Civic Attitude and Skills Questionnaire (CASQ; Moely et al., 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can make a difference in my community.</td>
<td>“I believe I can make a difference in my community.”</td>
<td>Civic and Political Efficacy Measure (Kahne, Middaugh, &amp; Schutjer-Mance, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am aware of the needs facing my community.</td>
<td>“There are needs in the community.”</td>
<td>Community Service Attitudes Scale (Shiarella et al., 2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributing my skills will make the community a better place.</td>
<td>“Contributing my skills will make the community a better place.”</td>
<td>Community Service Attitudes Scale (Shiarella et al., 2000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Survey results were analyzed in jamovi (The jamovi project, 2019), a free, open statistical software package, using a three-way factorial design analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine if there were significant differences in the students’ perceived value of civic engagement based on their responses to the three independent variable questions in the online survey.

A Cronbach’s alpha of 0.735, calculated post hoc from the results of this study, indicated the five measures of civic engagement had an acceptable internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .70 being considered acceptable in exploratory research (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). This provided some evidence of reliability for the value of civic engagement in the community scale.

Results and Discussion

One hundred and fifty-nine students (n = 159) completed the online survey, for an estimated response rate of (48.9%). The largest group of responses to the survey were from freshman (45.3%), followed by seniors (18.9%), sophomores (17.6%), juniors (10.7%), and graduate students (6.9%). This was the first service-learning course for 88% percent of all students who responded. Students indicating prior involvement with a youth service club (53.5%) versus those reporting no involvement with a youth service club (46.5%) reflected a relatively balanced split among respondents. A majority of students (67%) reported that their parents had discussed
current events in the home versus those whose parents had not discussed current events in the home (33%).

Examining Initiating Factors for Student Perceptions of the Value of Civic Engagement

A three-way factorial ANOVA was conducted in jamovi (The jamovi project, 2019) to assess any differences in the dependent variable of a student’s perceived value of civic engagement based on the three independent variables as initiating factors. The results of the ANOVA analysis are shown in Table 2. The a priori level of significance for the data analysis was set at $p < .05$.

Table 2. Three-Way ANOVA of Three Initiating Factors’ Influence on Millennial Students’ Perceived Value of Civic Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable: Student’s Perceived Value of Civic Engagement Score</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior Involvement with a Youth Service Club (YC)</td>
<td>27.12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27.12</td>
<td>0.8724</td>
<td>0.352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Service-Learning Course (SL)</td>
<td>58.90</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>58.90</td>
<td>1.8946</td>
<td>0.171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents Discussed Current Events In Home (PD)</td>
<td>203.39</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>203.39</td>
<td>6.5424</td>
<td>0.012*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YC ✻ SL</td>
<td>46.57</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>46.57</td>
<td>1.4981</td>
<td>0.223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YC ✻ PD</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>0.0637</td>
<td>0.801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL ✻ PD</td>
<td>186.66</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>186.66</td>
<td>6.0043</td>
<td>0.015*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YC ✻ SL ✻ PD</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>0.1614</td>
<td>0.688</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residuals</td>
<td>4663.29</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>31.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$

There was a statistically significant difference in the perceived value of civic engagement scores based on whether or not the students’ parents discussed current events in the home (PD) ($F = 6.5424$, df = 1, $p = 0.012$). Therefore, results indicate students whose parents discussed current events at home have significantly higher scores on the perceived value of civic engagement scale.

Likewise, there was a statistically significant two-way interaction between students who participated in prior service-learning courses (SL) and whose parents discussed current events (PD) on the student’s value of civic engagement in the community ($F = 6.0043$, df = 1, $p = 0.015$). Again, students whose parents discussed current events at home and those students who participated in service-learning previously, have significantly higher scores on the perceived value of civic engagement scale.

There was no significant difference in the students’ perceived value of civic engagement scale based on either their involvement in a youth service club (YC) or their prior participation in a service-learning course (SL). There were also no other significant interaction effects between the independent variables.
Limitations

Limitations to this study included a limited sample size ($n = 159$) and the use of a convenience sample of millennial students enrolled in college-level service-learning classes, which limits the generalizability of the results to only those individuals who completed the survey.

Another major limitation of this study is the absence of evidence of instrument validity regarding the online survey questions, especially the perceived value of civic engagement scale. Further studies that include instrument validation procedures are needed to validate the instrument used in this study or to develop other valid and reliable instruments to measure a students’ perceived value of civic engagement.

A final note regarding the limitations of the study involves the limited number of variables to reflect the initiating factors. Additional research beyond this exploratory study could more rigorously operationalize and assess all four components of Pancer’s (2015) Integrative Theory of Civic Engagement Model. This research brief provides a first step in that larger process.

Conclusion

This exploratory study examined the significance of three independent variables as initiating factors for millennial students’ perceptions of the value of civic engagement. This study found that discussion of current events in the home by the students’ parents, as well as an interaction between the students’ prior service-learning course participation and discussion of current events in the home by their parents, had significant influences as initiating factors on the students’ perceptions of the value of civic engagement.

Influence has impact (Pancer, 2015), and this study provides some evidence that parents discussing current events in the home has some influence on a millennial student’s perception of the value of being involved in the community. How millennials perceive their community and how that individual orients himself or herself within a community experience can make the difference between a one-time volunteer event or setting the foundation for an ethos of engagement, that may lead to sustaining acts of engagement (Pancer, 2015). Based on the results of this study, it appears that parents may have a significant role to play in building the pathway from which civic habits are formed.

Implications

One implication from this research brief is to examine ways in which human development professionals can foster more open discussion of current events by parents through the planning and implementation of programs that include instructional methods and activities that can encourage and teach ways for parents to discuss current events with their children, both of the millennial generation and, possibly, even younger children. Future research is encouraged to
further examine the influence of parents and other influencers discussing current events in shaping civic engagement values and building long-lasting civic skills in millennials, as well as members of future generations of children.

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