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Communication and Political Socialization: Challenges and Opportunities for Research

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Whether understood from the macro-social perspective of how "societies and systems inculcate appropriate norms and practices in citizens, residents, or members" or from the micro-social perspective of the particular "patterns and processes by which individuals engage in political development and learning" (Sapiro, 2004, pp. 2–3), political socialization is fundamentally concerned with the mechanisms that create and maintain democratic institutions and practices. Since Hyman (1959) and Sigel (1965) defined the subfield beginning half a century ago, research has focused on childhood and adolescence as critical periods for socialization, often at the expense of the life stages that follow, particularly early adulthood (Dennis, 1968; Niemi & Hepburn, 1995). This temporal focus has encouraged attention to factors such as family and school over media and peer networks, even though these influences may be just as consequential (Galston, 2001; McDevitt & Chaffee, 2000, 2002; McLeod, 2000).

These communication factors may be particularly important for models of political socialization that focus on the transitional period between adolescence and early adulthood, life stages when parental and educational influence is comparatively reduced or more distal. This is typified by Jennings and Niemi's work following secondary school students into adulthood (1981). Their attention to teenage and post-adolescent phases is part of a broader call for political socialization research to forgo studies of "children and, instead, focus on political learning in the years of most rapid change to [mature] learning capacities and adult attitudes" (Niemi & Hepburn, 1995, p. 7). Indeed, lifelong learning models, attention to generational differences, and consideration of a wider range of public-spirited behaviors characterize the current, third wave of political socialization scholarship (Jennings, 2002; Sears & Levy, 2003; Sapiro, 2004).

As part of this turn, there is also renewed attention to communicative activities in the classroom and within the family (McLeod, 2000). The communication norms established in school and at home are thought to have long-term implications for young people's engagement with political life, though these norms may be in serious jeopardy due to limited opportunities for students to develop communication skills essential to citizenship in the classroon (Hess, 2002) and "a weakening of the home as a place where news habits are acquired" (Patterson, 2007, p. 24). This is particularly troubling in light of the fact that adults who seek news and talk politics are more informed concerning public affairs, more sophisticated in their conceptions of social issues, and more efficacious regarding public

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action, all of which lead to participation in public life (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). Whether this is true for youth remains to be seen.

Although young people consume conventional news sources less than their older counterparts (Mindich, 2004), a growing number of scholars have spoken against the view that those under 30 have "retreated into a privately oriented, self-consuming lifestyle that has replaced national news with MTV" (Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, & Zukin, 2002, p. 189). Instead, young people increasingly favor Web-based sources for news and gravitate toward local civic participation and rights activism such as volunteering over traditional political action such as voting. Whether the recent shift toward electoral politics reverses this trend in the long term demands attention.

Challenges and Opportunities for Research

This special issue was conceived in the hope of encouraging a concerted effort of future inquiry into core questions concerning communication and political socialization. When examining how communication, writ large, influences engagement in public life during the critical period spanning adolescence and young adulthood, scholars must (a) attend to communication processes and effects across levels of analysis, from macro to micro; (b) consider the inherent interdependence of the key agents of socialization, especially parents, school, peers, and media; (c) recognize that the *dosage* and *potency* of media use often do not correspond, with low aggregate exposure levels often paired with sizable predictive power in multivariate models; and (d) understand the mediating role of communication, both media consumption and interpersonal exchanges, for a wide range of demographic, ideological, and social structural factors.

Each one of the entries selected for inclusion in this special issue addresses one or more of these theoretical/methodological issues. As a collection, the articles that follow illustrate the importance of tackling these issues for breaking new ground regarding the connections between communication and political socialization. To place the contributors' work in the proper context, we begin by discussing these conceptual concerns and then relate them to the range of extant research before turning to a brief discussion of the entries and the process for their review and selection.

Connecting Macro and Micro Influences

A half-century ago, political socialization research focused narrowly on how various *agencies* of socialization, especially parents and schools, *transmitted* sets of facts, attitudes, and behavior deemed essential to maintaining democracy in a given society. The contributions in this issue reflect how completely the earlier interpretation of political socialization has been revised. The top-down implication of the term agency, that experienced parents teach neophyte youth, has been challenged by evidence indicating that learning processes are reciprocal as parents and their children learn from one another (McDevitt & Ostrowski, 2009/this issue). Further, the idea of what constitutes "essential knowledge" is challenged by evidence showing that conventional *factual* knowledge and *connective* structural knowledge have distinctively different sets of antecedents (Hively & Eveland, 2009/this issue). Other research has found that simple knowledge and connective complexity also have distinctive effects on different types of citizen participation among adults (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2004). Contemporary interpretations of communication and political socialization processes have thus become more complicated but also more theoretically interesting by their providing a more nuanced understanding of how democracies operate.

Political socialization research, along with other areas of political communication research, has recently experienced renewed interest in the macro-micro issues that have perplexed the social sciences for decades (Slater, Snyder, & Hayes, 2006). Families, social networks, schools, communities, and the media are macro level units that serve as *social contexts* as well as sources of information and opportunities for the political learning and behavior of individuals. Individuals make *sociotropic* judgments about these contextual units as *institutions* apart from their feelings about individuals (e.g,, parents, teachers) they encounter in these social contexts. These micro *subjective* sociotropic judgments alter the impact of any given social context, but the macro *objective* structure and processes of the macro social context may have effects without the subjective awareness of individuals within the social context. Macro units have properties that are often best conceived and analyzed with concepts that have no micro individual-level counterparts. Data from censuses and other data recorded in macro units are often used as *global* measures for macro and cross-level analyses (Lazarsfeld, 1958).

Multilevel statistical analysis techniques developed by other social sciences (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1987; Sampson, 1988) have been adopted in communication research (Paek, Yoon, & Shah, 2005; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Slater et al., 2006) and in political socialization research by contributors to this volume (Hively & Eveland; Lopez, Levine, Dautrich, & Yalof; and Romer, Jamieson, & Pasek). A major benefit of this approach is that it allows simultaneous analyses of multiple levels that allocate variance in the dependent variables accounted for by each level. Most political communication applications to date have been restricted to using aggregated micro individual-level data allocated to various macro levels. Future research should strive to utilize existing macro level data and examine cross-level interactions.

The Centrality of Communication Across Key Agents

Much of the recent research concerning questions of political socialization has tended to focus on one of the key agents of socialization into politics without considering how family, school, peers, and media intersect to generate the norms of citizenship in young people (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Dudley & Gitelson, 2002). The entries collected here, along with a growing body of contemporary research, argue for the centrality of communicative phenomena in the home, at school, among peers, and through media when theorizing what connects these key agents of socialization (Hively & Eveland; Glynn, Huge, & Lunney; and McDevitt & Ostrowski). This shift requires traditional models of political socialization to be radically altered to account for the effects of communication factors across these contexts. These revised models must focus on *processes* rather than *outcomes*, as these varied agents are connected to understand how they produce the civic and political engagement that is so vital to democracy.

This perspective recognizes that the socializing influences of mass media on youth are often complemented and reinforced by communication with parents, at school, and among peers. How parents communicate with their adolescent children has been found to be particularly important to civic socialization (Chaffee, McLeod, & Wackman, 1973). In particular, children who are encouraged to freely express their ideas even if they are at odds with those of their parents tend to be more political engaged, whereas those who are raised in communication contexts where conformity is emphasized are less so. In a similar vein, political discussions with family, friends, coworkers, and others in one's social network have been found to play a key role in the development of civic identity (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). These factors have been found to influence adolescent and

early adult socialization, complementing and channeling the effects of media on relevant outcomes.

Along these same lines, attention has shifted from civics education and curricula as conveyers of information about current affairs or textbook knowledge about guaranteed rights and historical figures (see Luskin, 1990; Smith, 1989) to the role of classroom discussions, civic simulations, and service learning (Niemi & Junn, 2000; Walker, 2002). Chief among these has been the discussion of controversial issues with the goal of teaching young people how to deliberate on public problems (Mansbridge, 1991; Hess, 2002). This emphasis on high-quality public talk speaks to the need to prepare young people to engage with those outside of school settings—family, friends, coworkers, and other sources of cross-cutting perspectives—in beneficial ways (Mutz, 2006).

Variance in Levels of Media Use and Its Effects

The contributions to this special issue offer numerous examples where presentation of the *level* of an independent variable aids greatly in the interpretation of the *effect* of that variable. In non-experimental research comparing various news media in terms of their influence, the total impact of each medium is a function of its level of use as well as the size of its effects. This is analogous to medical research where the effect of a drug might be a function of both *dosage* size and *potency* of its effect per unit of dosage. We might expect that the news media with the highest levels of use (dosage) would also have the strongest effects (potency), but that is not necessarily the case.

This is best illustrated by comparing dosage and potency of broadcast and print news. Until recent years, national television news attracted somewhat larger audiences than did newspapers, but the effects of newspaper reading on both knowledge and political participation were far stronger than those for television news (McLeod et al., 1996). Whereas political socialization researchers have noted substantial differences between levels of news media use between youth and adults (Mindich, 2004), or pointed out that youth have abandoned traditional news media in favor of Internet news, the similarities and differences in effects have been largely ignored.

Research presented in the summary article of this issue (Shah, McLeod, & Lee) provides additional examples of the relative independence of levels of use and media effects. In the study of parents and kids presented in that entry, levels of informational media use of television news, newspapers, and the Internet were found to be higher for high school than for middle school youth. Yet, the combined effects of informational media use were as high or slightly higher for middle schoolers than for the older students. Informational media use is less common for middle schoolers, but those who do use are more likely to participate. Further, use of the Web for news is less common than traditional news media use among adolescents, but Internet effects are far stronger.

Similar examples were found among young adults (Zukin et al., 2006). Such asymmetrical patterns of levels of use and effects have important implications for public policy efforts to reduce gaps in civic engagement. If a disadvantaged group has lower use of a given medium but equivalent strength of effects, remedial measures might concentrate on increasing use by making it more accessible or less costly. If uses are equivalent but effects are discrepant, then efforts might focus on making information in the medium easier to understand, and hence more effective. Attention to issues of dosage and potency is particularly meaningful for understanding how to reach the non-college-bound students in high school classrooms. Absent strategies to address engagement gaps between college- and non-college-bound adolescents, gaps are likely to widen.

Socialization and Communication Mediation

A number of the studies included in this special issue highlight that communication effects on civic life, whether at home, in the classroom, or via the media, are often indirect (McDevitt & Ostrowski; Shah et al.). This insight grows out of work on the *communication mediation model*, which concludes that informational media use and political discussion largely channel the effects of demographics, ideology, and social structure on outcome orientations and participatory responses (McLeod et al., 2001; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2004; Shah et al., 2007). A strength of this model is the integration of mass and interpersonal communication into processes that result in civic and political engagement, as previously demonstrated by Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995).

Although there has been limited testing of this model among adolescents and young adults, this mediational approach is well grounded in the O-S-O-R framework adopted from social psychology (Markus & Zajonc, 1985). This process has been further specified in the form of a *citizen communication mediation model* (Shah et al., 2005). This model theorizes and finds that media's influences are strong, but largely indirect, shaping participatory behaviors through effects on conventional and online discussion about news. Testing this model among adolescents and young adults is a necessary next step, especially considering this generation's use of digital media as a public sphere and all of the other sites of conversation when family, school, and peers are considered.

This new model adds to research on the relationship between information and participation in two ways: (a) It situates communication among citizens as a critical mediator between information seeking via the mass media and democratic outcomes, adding another step in the causal chain; and (b) it asserts that online pathways to participation complement existing offline pathways, adding a new mediational route. It is important to note that this citizen communication mediation model contends that there are similarities but also important differences between talking about politics face to face (i.e., political discussion) and expressing political views in online settings (i.e., political messaging) for engagement in public life, whether civic or political participation.

Face-to-face political talk largely occurs with family, friends, coworkers, and others within one's social network, and is thought to expose people to a somewhat wider range of perspectives, help citizens interpret media messages, and construct meaning about public affairs (Kim & Kim, 2008; Southwell & Yzer, 2007). Political messaging may share some of these characteristics. However, it also permits the sharing of views with a much wider and dispersed array of people. As such, the costs of mass expression and collective organizing are reduced, allowing individuals to "post, at minimal cost, messages and images that can be viewed instantly by global audiences" (Lupia & Sin, 2003, p. 316). Such messaging is largely textual, and thus may produce compositional effects associated with prepared communication (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999).

Innovative and Integrated Inquiries

The studies selected for inclusion in this special issue directly address these challenges and opportunities, and do so in ways that position political communication at the crux of future research on youth socialization. Each one advances theorizing through a sophisticated, empirically grounded investigation of adolescents' and young adults' engagement in public life. In the best tradition of socialization research, school, family, peers, and media are all featured. The contributors include many of the major voices in debates over communication and youth socialization.

A unique review and commentary process was employed to select these pieces—a process that we believe has produced a highly integrated set of entries. Of the 25 submissions we received, we first trimmed the list to 10 manuscripts that had high potential for publication based on theoretical contribution, methodological sophistication, and goodness of fit with the scope of the special issue. Prior to submitting these 10 manuscripts for blind review to our panel, the authors were given a chance to tighten and improve their work. These returned manuscripts were then distributed among our experts Molly Andolina, Jaeho Cho, Lewis Friedland, Diana Hess, Kent Jennings, and Zhongdang Pan. It is worth noting that these scholars span the fields of education, mass communication, political science, and sociology, as do our contributors.

We sent each member of this panel a set of five manuscripts to evaluate. Given that we were soliciting a wide range of opinions on multiple manuscripts, rather than a single piece, we asked reviewers to move directly to candid critiques and clear directions on how each piece might be improved. We used these evaluations, coupled with our own close reading of each manuscript, to determine which ones would remain in consideration and which ones would be released to the authors for resubmission to another journal.

Of the 10 manuscripts submitted for review, 5 were invited for further revision and resubmission. Once these 5 revised manuscripts had been returned to us, we circulated all of them among all of the contributors to the special issue for peer commentary. Each team of authors read over the 4 other manuscripts and prepared a short set of constructive and integrative comments. The goal of this exercise was to highlight connections and foster convergence among the included articles. As a result, each manuscript received a final set of comments for improvement and integration, which were addressed before the final versions were accepted for publication.

The Contributors

The result is a set of sophisticated and complementary pieces addressing core issues of communication and political socialization. We begin with an article by Michael McDevitt and Ally Ostrowski, who consider the home and the classroom as overlapping spheres of interpersonal political communication. Based on interviews of student-parent dyads across two elections, they examine whether *ideological conflict seeking* in the context of election campaigns contributes to the development of a moral-political identity. They advance such ideological conflict seeking as a central concept for future research on civic identity development. This work offers many other notable elements, including data collection over an extended time period, attention to the dyadic relationship of adolescents and their parents, and consideration of unconventional modes of political engagement such as political consumerism.

The next contribution, by Myiah Hively and William Eveland, is a careful examination of antecedents and effects of political discussion on two forms of political knowledge. The research, which was conducted in 17 high schools in an urban district with high proportions of minority and economically disadvantaged students, produced robust findings that frequent discussion was associated with both factual and structural knowledge, though these forms of knowledge otherwise emerge for rather different sets of antecedents. For example, elaboration, thinking about political discussions, was found to be unrelated to factual knowledge but strongly influenced seeing structural connections between concepts. This study is also noteworthy for its attention to broadcast, print, and online news and its use of multilevel modeling to examining interactions between the socio and concept dimensions of family communication patterns.

This is followed by an entry from Carroll Glynn, Michael Huge, and Carole Lunney investigating how information and social norms intersect in the lives of young people, in this case college students. In a pre-post experimental design, students were randomly assigned to conditions where information about the percentage of college students who voted in the last election was manipulated. Social norms regarding frequency (descriptive norm) and importance (injunctive norm) of voting were measured before and after the intervention and found to be a significant predictor of intention to vote. Similarity to other students moderated the relationship between social norms of student voting and intention to vote. Notably, giving students information about the prevalence of college student voting increased the level of agreement with the injunctive norm. This once again speaks to the importance of social networks in early adult socialization into political life.

Next is the entry from Daniel Romer, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, and Josh Pasek, which offers a careful examination of the relationship of various types of media use to civic activity and social trust among a large representative national sample of 14- to 22-year-olds. Its tests whether a pessimistic life outlook, expressed as hopelessness and fatalism, would mediate the effects of television and use of other media on trust and civic behavior. Instead, they find that fatalism has a direct negative effect on both trust and activity, whereas hopelessness has a direct negative effect on trust. Important too is the very modest relationship between social trust and civic activity that will surprise readers who expect support for a "virtuous circle." Less surprising, they find informational Internet use and book reading are positively associated with civic activity, but hours spent with television are negatively related to both activity and trust. Most commendable is the effort to disentangle the causal ordering between media use and social capital.

Last among the reviewed entries is the work of Mark Hugo Lopez, Peter Levine, Kenneth Dautrich, and David Yalof, who examine the formation of beliefs about civil liberties during adolescence. They focus on what young people learn and experience in schools concerning the Constitution, the press, and the First Amendment. To do so, they employ hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to analyze multilevel data created by combining responses from the Future of the First Amendment survey with data on state education policies. Their results reveal that discussing the news media in class enhances students' attitudes and habits related to the free press. Teachers who required the consumption of news spurred use of news media among students. On the other hand, existing state policies that might be expected to enhance students' knowledge, attitudes, or habits related to the First Amendment do not seem to have a significant impact.

The special issue closes with a data essay we have prepared highlighting some initial findings from a national panel study of adolescents and their parents conducted around the 2008 election. This entry, which only includes data from the first wave of what will be a three-wave panel, advanced the concept of communication competence as central to the development of civic competence. To do so, we consider how a range of communicative activities, from talking politics at home or in school to consuming conventional and digital news content, relate to three forms of engagement: political participation, civic participation, and political consumerism. The results provide considerable support for our central thesis and suggest a sizable meditational role for communication variables in the formation of youth engagement in public life.

Unsolved Issues

The contributions to this volume taken together point to several important problems that should be addressed in future plans for research on communication and political socialization.

Of primary importance is the need to develop research designs that will trace the trajectories of media use, issue discussions, and civic learning and behavior from adolescence into early and later adulthood. The term socialization implies political learning processes whose effects may carry over into the entire life course. Although several of the articles in the present volume use data gathered over several months, the time period is too short to capture more fundamental changes in the lives of their youth samples. Longer-term panel designs are required to address this issue.

The analyses of marked differences in levels and effects of communication and participation across the life course using large Civic and Political Health of the Nation data sets (discussed by Shah et al.) provide important information but nonetheless prevent assertions about individual *change* because such cross-section designs confound cohort effects and life-cycle maturational effects. Kurt Lewin, the eminent social psychologist, stressed the need to study people as they cross crucial junctures in their lives. The transition from late adolescence to early adulthood, from the end of schooling to the start of individuals' occupational lives, is perhaps the most important period for political socialization research. For most young people, this change means a loss of social capital that supports civic engagement. Support from family, peers, and community diminishes, while the demands of the new occupational world delay reintegration.

What is needed is cross-sectional designs that cover a decade or more from late adolescence into adulthood. These longer-term panel studies are expensive enterprises and require painstaking efforts of committed researchers. But techniques have been developed that allow a large proportion of panel respondents to be retained over long periods of time. Given the growing body of findings that document the importance of media and interpersonal communication to youth socialization, financial support may become more feasible. The evidence for the interdependent influence of parents, schools, informational media, and peer networks suggests that scholars from a variety of disciplines should be included in longer-term panel research. It also indicates the importance of including macro data from social systems and multilevel analyses in panel designs.

Of course, these efforts to trace the effects of communication over time will only be as good as the measures used to assess exposure and attention to media. Much of the research presented in this volume, in keeping with political communication research more generally, depends on secondary analyses of large data sets gathered to answer a widely diverse set of research objectives. As a result, measurement of media use is often limited to "days per week" using TV news, newspapers, Internet news, and sc forth. Such content-free measures treat as equal behaviors ranging from "glancing at the headlines on the coffee table" and "having the TV news on while text-messaging friends about weekend plans" and "finding out where the candidates stand on health care." Skimming, inadvertent exposure, and purposeful information seeking are tossed together. Such measures nonetheless do seem to produce valid results, but we should keep in mind that these results vastly underestimate media effects compared to more precise measures.

More subtle measures are needed, including the "how" as well as the "what" of media use. The need to supplement measures of exposure with attention to specific content, as advocated by Chaffee and Schleuder (1986), often remains unrecognized and underadopted. The growing dominance of the Internet as a source of news and information presents an additional measurement problem for political socialization research. The Internet widens opportunities for selecting diverse sources of content not found in traditional news media. Given the evidence that youth most often multitask while using digital media, we need to develop new concepts that capture their selection processes to more adequately measure informational use and assess effects on cognitive processes and structures. As the articles

presented in this special issue indicate, the agenda for research is varied and fruitful but also full of challenges for those interested in exploring how communication socializes citizenship. Of course, the opportunities for making substantive contributions are as great as these challenges.

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