Citizenship of students and social desirability: Living apart together?

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ABSTRACT

Insight into the citizenship of students is typically gained via surveys. However, social desirability always plays a role in self-reporting. The relationship between social desirability and citizenship is multi-interpretable. In this article, two views on the divergence and convergence of citizenship and social desirability are presented leading to different assumptions regarding the relationship between social desirability and citizenship. These assumptions are then examined empirically with the aid of a large database on the citizenship competences of students in primary and secondary education in the Netherlands. The results show that there is a significant level of convergence that inhibits correction of survey measures for social desirability. The implications of these findings for furthering our understanding of citizenship are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The citizenship of students and the role which the school can play in the development of the citizenship of students have received considerable discussion over the past few decades. National educational policy in almost every European country and other western countries has been steering in the direction of the inclusion of citizenship as part of the educational curriculum (Eurydice, 2005, 2012). Various instruments have been developed to measure the citizenship of young people. These instruments enable the large-scale study of the components of student citizenship and also allow for international comparison, thus adding to the scientific knowledge base in the field of citizenship.

Many of the instruments used to measure citizenship involve self-report by students. Examples are the international instrumentation for the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS, Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010), the instrumentation for the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS; Cleaver, Ireland, Kerr, & Lopes, 2005; Ireland, Kerr, Lopes, & Nelson, 2006; Kerr et al., 2007) and the Citizenship Competence Questionnaire (Ten Dam, Geijsel, Reumerman, & Ledoux, 2011). In any measurement instrument which relies at least in part on self-report, social desirability is an issue. The risk is therefore always present that students judge themselves more positively due to an inclination to respond in a socially desirable manner. Social desirability scores are therefore commonly subtracted from self-reported values.

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Little attention, however, has been paid to questions concerning social desirability in quantitative studies into citizenship to date. This is remarkable because citizenship is a heavily value-laden concept related to social and societal behaviour (Biesta, 2011; Van Gunsteren, 1998), leading to questions concerning social desirability (Fischer & Katz, 2000). The two concepts have a substantive affinity to each other as in both cases social norms which call for the display of behaviour desired by the environment play a role. For "good citizenship," this means that one behaves in a social desirable manner in addition to having a critical-reflective attitude (Westheimer, 2008; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Viewed from such a perspective, a higher degree of good citizenship is associated with a higher degree of social desirability.

The aim of the research reported on here was to gain a better understanding of the relations between student citizenship and social desirability. On the basis of empirical data on the citizenship competences of students from Dutch primary and secondary education, we answer the question of whether social desirability plays a role in the responding of young people when asked about their citizenship and, if so, how this association of citizenship by social desirability can best be understood. We close with a discussion of the implications of the results of our study for the further study and understanding of citizenship among youth today.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Democratic citizenship

Citizenship in itself as well as the development of citizenship as an educational goal is an essentially normative issue on which divergent opinions exist (cf. Van Gunsteren, 1998). In the relevant international discourses today, the concept of citizenship is primarily linked to the concept of democracy (Thayer-Bacon, 2008; Torney-Purta, 2004; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). It is assumed that strong democracy includes the agency of individuals within both the political *and* social domains and thus the interconnections between citizens beyond the domain of government alone (Barber, 1984; Oser & Veugelers, 2008). Citizenship concerns identity development and is rooted in the daily lives of people (Biesta, 2011; Haste, 2004).

Interpreting democracy as continuously "in the making" (Barber, 1984) or as "a mode of associated living" (Dewey, 1966) requires specific competences on the part of citizens. According to Westheimer (2008), "good citizenship" requires citizens to be willing and able to critically evaluate different perspectives, explore strategies for change and reflect upon such issues as justice, (in)equality and democratic engagement in addition to a capacity to function within a community in a socially accepted and responsible manner. The resilience of a democracy does not ask for the augmentation of shared values but, rather, a willingness and capacity "to agree to disagree", to deal with different perspectives on critical moral or social issues and to look for peaceful ways to coexist (cf. Banks, 2004). An important part of these citizenship competences is social sensibility, involvement and social adaptability. Citizenship thus requires individuals to be willing and able to take the needs of others into consideration, help those in need and so forth (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). One also must be prepared to make one's own critical contributions to society without denying or hindering the citizenship of others (Ten Dam & Volman, 2004; Wardekker, 2001), and this entails norms which society generally perceives as worthy and thus as socially desired—like the social norm that one should stand up against injustice.

In research on the citizenship competences of young people, many of the aforementioned aspects of "good citizenship" have been incorporated into the measurement instruments used (e.g. Geijsel, Ledoux, Reumerman, & Ten Dam, 2012; Isac, Maslowski, Creemers, & Van der Werf, 2013; Keating, Kerr, Benton, Mundy, & Lopes, 2010; Schulz et al., 2010). As part of these instruments, citizenship knowledge is determined on the basis of a test composed of multiple choice items in which students demonstrate their knowledge of the democratic constitutional state and—to a far lesser extent—issues which concern citizenship in civil society. Citizenship attitudes, skills and reflection are measured via self-report (Likert scale items). Students are asked questions which concern social adaptability (e.g. willingness and capacity to listen to the opinions of others), engagement with societal issues (e.g. interest in the differences between people or groups of people, desire to contribute), critical reflection (e.g. contemplation of the position of minorities and prejudices) and the capacity to stand up for one's opinion. A measurement method which requires people to pass judgement on their own intentions and capacities, however, immediately elicits the question of the extent to which answers reflect the true state of affairs. Social desirability always plays a role in self-report measures. The relation between citizenship and social desirability, however, can be interpreted in different ways (cf. Ganster, Hennessey, & Luthans, 1983).

2.2. Social desirability

Two views on social desirability can be distinguished. The first is based on the assumption that some people judge themselves more positively in order to make a good impression with regard to culturally derived norms and standards. Viewed from such a perspective, Crowne and Marlowe (1964) understand social desirability to be primarily a personality characteristic: the tendency to portray oneself positively is different between individuals due to personality traits such as anxiety, achievement motivation, and self-esteem. Paulhus (1991, 2003) further distinguishes a more situationally determined component of social desirability within this view, namely "impression management" (also see Edwards, 1957; Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987). Whether intentionally presenting oneself as 'good-looking' or not, in research these socially desirable answers should be filtered out. The second view on social desirability builds upon its situational component and argues that social desirability can be conceptually inherent to a specific topic. This applies to primarily value-laden topics.