



## Mother–adolescent civic messages: Associations with adolescent civic behavior and civic judgments

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### ABSTRACT

Observational and multi-informant survey data were used to examine associations among mothers' civic behavior, observed mother–adolescent messages about civic responsibility, and adolescents' judgments about civic duty and civic behavior. Adolescents ( $N = 144$ ,  $M_{age} = 14.49$  [12–18] years) and their mothers ( $N = 144$ ) participated in a semi-structured, dyadic discussion task focused on civic responsibility and adolescents completed questionnaires assessing civic behavior and judgments about whether individuals should engage in different civic activities. Eight themes emerged within the parent–adolescent civic discussion task: *community service*, *vote*, *other standard political involvement* (e.g., political awareness), *follow regulations*, *be productive* (e.g., working and becoming educated), *help others*, *respect others*, and *respect country*. Mothers' community service involvement and messages concerning respect and helping were positively associated with adolescents' community service behavior. Mothers' messages concerning following regulations were negatively associated with teens' social movement judgments. Additionally, adolescents' own messages were associated with their civic judgments.

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Adolescence is a developmental period marked by substantial physical, emotional, and social-cognitive growth. During adolescence, youth also gain increased exposure to civic institutions and more frequently engage in community and political activities (Flanagan, 2013). The co-occurrence of social cognitive and emotional development coupled with greater exposure to social institutions may prompt youth to form more nuanced beliefs about the relation between self and society, including emerging notions of the social contract and civic responsibility. Forming positive beliefs about civic responsibility and participating in civic activities during adolescence are thought to undergird active engagement throughout adulthood (Metzger & Smetana, 2010). Thus, scholars interested in adolescent civic development have sought to identify social factors that promote favorable beliefs about civic duty and encourage civic involvement (Sherrod & Lauchardt, 2009).

Civic engagement broadly refers to attitudes and behaviors directed toward the betterment of society (Zaff, Hart, Flanagan, Youniss, & Levine, 2010). Civic activities are diverse, and may include standard types of political involvement (i.e., normative political activities that maintain effective democratic functioning, including voting and following political news; Walker, 2002) and non-standard social movement

involvement (i.e., political activities that seek to change the existing political or social structure, including protesting or boycotting; Youniss et al., 2002). Additionally, some scholars have proposed that civic engagement involves non-political community activities, such as engagement in community service (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Participation in these political and community activities during adolescence is a central component of positive youth development (Lerner et al., 2005). In an effort to promote youth civic engagement, scholars have sought to identify contextual factors that contribute to adolescents' positive civic beliefs and increased civic participation, including organized activity involvement (Metzger & Smetana, 2009), supportive classroom climates (Lin, 2015), and parental modeling and messages (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

Parents may be an especially important social influence on adolescent civic behavior and beliefs. Parents foster adolescent civic development by modeling civic behavior and communicating expectations through verbal messages about civic duty (Rosenthal, Feiring, & Lewis, 1998). The majority of previous research has focused on links between self-reported frequency of parent–adolescent conversations concerning current events or politics and youth civic behavior (Zaff, Malanchuk, Michelsen, & Eccles, 2003). Scholars have not examined whether the *content* of parents' specific messages about civic duty are linked with youths' civic behavior and beliefs. The current study used both observational and multi-informant survey methodology to examine associations among mothers' civic behavior, mothers' and adolescents' observed messages about civic duty, adolescents' civic behavior, and adolescents' judgments about civic duty.

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## Parents and adolescent civic development

According to political socialization and developmental systems theories, parents are thought to influence adolescent civic judgments and participation through modeling civic behavior and discussing civic duty. Political socialization theory states that adolescents learn civic expectations from observing their parents' civic participation and listening to parents discuss politics and current events (Hess & Torney, 1967; Niemi, 1973; Sigel, 1970). Developmental systems theories propose a more transactional process, where adolescents' own attitudes and abilities dynamically interact with elements of their ecological contexts. From this perspective, parents modeling of civic behavior and engagement in civic discussion would be hypothesized to work in dynamic relation to adolescents' own beliefs about civic duty.

Political socialization theory and developmental systems theories suggest that parental civic modeling and parent–adolescent civic discussion may have important implications for adolescents' civic judgments and behavior. Parents who regularly engage in civic activities may exemplify the importance of participation and provide adolescents with opportunities for similar types of engagement. Additionally, political discussions with adolescents may provide parents with an opportunity to communicate personal and family values, social rules, and general expectations (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011). Evidence supporting the importance of parental civic modeling and parent–adolescent civic discussion is provided by a large number of studies that have found strong, positive associations among parent and adolescent civic behaviors (e.g., Bekkers, 2007; Plutzer, 2002; Zaff et al., 2003) and among the frequency of parent–adolescent political discussions and adolescent civic behavior (e.g., Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeter, 2003; McIntosh, Hart, & Youniss, 2007). However, previous measures of political discussion have primarily assessed the frequency of parent–adolescent conversations about current events and political news. Research has not yet examined links between the content of parent–adolescent discussions about civic duty and adolescents' civic behavior and judgments. Conversations about citizenship and civic duty may provide parents and adolescents with an opportunity to communicate messages about the importance of different types of civic activities and thus be more closely tied to adolescents' civic judgments and behavior.

### Content specificity within parent–adolescent civic discussion

Conceptualizations of civic duty are diverse (Sherrod, 2003), and heterogeneity in beliefs about civic responsibility may be reflected in parent and adolescent messages concerning civic duty. Recent research has shown that parents and teens communicate a diverse array of civic responsibilities within parent–adolescent civic discussions, including following regulations, being loyal and courteous, working, becoming educated, and participating in community and political affairs (Oosterhoff, Metzger, & Babskie, 2015). The content of parent civic messages may be one source of social information youth use to inform beliefs and decisions about whether to engage in civic activities. For example, youth may draw upon parental messages concerning the importance of political and community involvement when making decisions concerning civic participation and evaluating whether others should engage in similar activities. A primary aim of the current study was to examine how the content of parent–adolescent discussions about civic duty is associated with adolescents' participation in specific forms of civic behavior and their judgments about whether others should engage in similar activities. Identifying the specific links between parents' messages about civic duty and adolescents' civic judgments and behavior may provide valuable insight into developmental processes related to civic engagement and individual differences in adolescent civic behavior.

While adolescents may draw on parental messages about civic duty to inform their civic beliefs and behavior, youth may also use civic

discussion with their parents to express views of what they believe constitutes 'good citizenship'. These messages may encompass beliefs about the importance of specific civic activities, but may also include broader social values that potentially conflict with certain civic duties. For instance, youth frequently state that following regulations is an important civic obligation (Oosterhoff et al., 2015), which may reflect values of obedience and upholding the status quo. Youth who communicate messages about the importance of following rules and laws may be less inclined to support civic activities that actively work against the status quo, such as boycotting, protesting, and other social movement forms of participation. An exploratory aim of this research was to examine whether adolescents' own messages about civic duty are linked with their civic judgments and behavior.

Assessing parent and adolescent messages about civic duty, however, presents a methodological challenge. Beliefs concerning civic duty are diverse (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), and self-report methods may not adequately capture the variety of messages parents and adolescents communicate to one another. Video-recorded semi-structured discussion tasks may be ideal for capturing the anticipated range of parent and adolescent messages about civic duty. These tasks allow researchers to document the content of parents' and adolescents' civic messages in real time (Metzger et al., 2013; Wakschlag et al., 2011), which may be especially useful for capturing the conversational dynamics of the discussion, such as which focal (parent or adolescent) initiated the message. Our previous research has found that both parents and adolescents initiate messages that reference a wide variety of civic responsibilities within a video-recorded semi-structured civic discussion task (Oosterhoff et al., 2015). Thus, structured observational discussion tasks may be a useful tool to determine if, and in what proportion, civic duty messages are represented in parents' and adolescents' civic discussion and how these messages are associated with teens' civic behavior and civic judgments.

### The current study

The current study utilizes a developmental systems framework to examine associations among parents' civic behavior, parents' and adolescents' messages about civic duty, and adolescents' civic judgments and behavior. Based on previous research, it was anticipated that parents' civic behavior would be associated with teens' involvement and judgments concerning similar civic activities. Specifically, it was hypothesized that parents' engagement in community service, standard political, and social movement activities would be positively associated with adolescents' engagement in and judgments about community service, standard political, and social movement behavior, respectively. Furthermore, consistent with previous research (Fletcher, Elder, & Mekos, 2000), it was anticipated that parents' observed messages about civic duty would be associated with teens' involvement and judgments about similar activities over and above parents' civic behavior. Specifically, it was hypothesized that parents' messages concerning the importance of volunteering and helping others would be positively associated with teens' community service behavior and judgments and messages concerning voting and keeping up with politics would be positively associated with adolescents' standard political behavior and judgments. Given the dearth of research on adolescents' active role within civic discussion, associations among youths' civic messages, civic judgments, and behavior were explored.

### Method

#### Participants

Participants were 145 adolescents and their mothers. One adolescent–mother dyad was missing all self-reported measures and was removed from further analyses, making the final analytic sample 144 adolescents and their mothers ( $M_{age} = 44.00, SD = 7.22$ ). Adolescents

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