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Optimism and readiness for active citizenship among young people in various age groups

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Abstract

This paper analyses the types of optimism prevalent among young people and their attitudes towards active citizenship. Czapiński (2005) and Stach (2006) identify two types of optimism: (1) essential optimism and (2) expansive optimism. Our research assumption was that young people's perceptions of local future are related to expansive optimism, and their perceptions of global future – to essential optimism. We also assumed that greater optimism towards local future breeds greater readiness for social (participation in campaigns) and political (voting in elections, joining a political party, running for public office) engagement. The study attempted to answer the following questions: (1) Is there a difference between young people's essential and expansive optimism? (2) Is optimism linked with age? (3) Are young people's preferences for various civic activities linked with age? (4) Is readiness for political and social engagement linked with optimism towards local and global future? A total of 2325 young people in three age groups (11, 14 and 18 years) from four European countries (Poland, Great Britain, Spain and Turkey) answered a questionnaire designed by Cathie Holden, entitled 'What do you think about the future'. The questionnaire involved two questions about optimism, which were rated on a 5-point scale, and 4 questions about active citizenship, which were rated on a 4-point scale. The results indicate that: (1) the respondents are more optimistic towards local than global future; (2) optimism towards both local and global futures is linked with age, and the youngest respondents (11-year-olds) are most optimistic; (3) optimism and readiness for active citizenship are not correlated. Students who are more optimistic towards both local and global future declared their interest in joining a political party, but global optimism was positively correlated with the willingness to run for public office, and it was negatively correlated with the eagerness to vote in elections.

Keywords: *citizenship activity, adolescence, optimism*

Introduction

In the traditional approach, citizenship was understood as the relationship between an individual and a state. An individual had certain basic duties and rights, including allegiance to the state and respect for the law, readiness to defend the state in the event of a threat to national security, the right to join political parties or vote in elections. In this approach, citizenship was a concept confined to the realm of political science, history and sociology.

The contemporary approach to citizenship is quite different. Global processes are responsible for new phenomena (migration, individual rights in the context of discriminated groups and minorities, changes in women's role in society, global economy, population growth) as well as new problems (environmental pollution, health, conflict, violence, poverty, unemployment, racism, discrimination, terrorism), which are not always effectively solved by political regulations and require active civic attitudes and engagement (Kerr, 1999). Citizenship is increasingly defined as the relationship between an individual and daily life (Nelson & Kerr, 2006). This approach makes citizenship an interesting area of study for psychologists who can search for personal traits that contribute to civic engagement. Psychological research can also focus on young people, a group of 'incomplete citizens' who will begin to fulfill their civic duties only in the future. If civic engagement is understood as a set of behaviours and attitudes towards social problems, young people are not only preparing for active citizenship in the future, but they can also play important civic roles at present. Based on their first experiences and perceptions of local, global and political problems, young people form attitudes that will later encourage them to become active citizens or to withdraw from public life. Developmental psychology explores the process during which young people become ready for civic engagement and the factors that predispose them for social and political activities.

This paper analyses the correlations between young people's declared interest in civic activities and their levels of optimism, which is a personal trait.

Civic activity

Various definitions of citizenship have been formulated in the literature, and they differ in the underlying social mechanisms. The proposed concepts can be divided into three groups depending to the analysed processes and conditions. In the first group, citizenship is regarded as a social process, and various models of civic societies are identified, including models based on tradition, mobilisation, association and community (Herbst, 2005). The second concept deals with civic behaviours. Theiss-Morse (1993) identifies four types of civic behaviours: passive citizen, voter, spokesman and activist. In the third concept, citizenship is analysed in terms of active involvement (Lewicka, 2004, Torney-putra, 2003). Our approach to citizenship is most closely related to the third concept, and it is inspired by the definition coined by Kerry Kennedy (2006). Kennedy makes a distinction between passive and active components of citizenship. Passive citizenship is concerned with patriotism, respect for the law, allegiance to the state and a sense of identity. Those aspects will not be analysed in the study. Active citizenship involves conventional political activities and participation in social campaigns, and it is briefly overviewed below.

Conventional political engagement involves active participation in political life. It can be subdivided into semi-active engagement, which involves occasional acts of political engagement such as voting in elections and showing general interest in political affairs, and active political engagement, which involves direct participation in political life, such as joining a political party, holding an office in democratic organisations or running for public office. Social engagement entails daily activities on behalf of social organisations,

campaigns supporting vital social causes and cooperation with non-governmental organisations.

The results of numerous studies indicate that young people have been turning away from politics in recent years (Młodzi, 2011). This study aimed to determine the types of political activity that are met with greatest reluctance as well as those that attract the interest of young people. Adolescents do not have full citizenship rights, in particular with regard to conventional political activities, and this study explored their readiness for civic engagement, which could be indicative of their attitudes towards participation in political life in adulthood. We also investigated potential developmental patterns in young people's readiness for civic engagement. This issue was explored by formulating the following research questions: 'Do the declared types of civic activities differ and are they linked with age; and if so, what patterns can be identified?'

The study was conducted on adolescents divided into three age groups: early adolescents – aged 11, mid-adolescents – aged 14, and late adolescents – aged 18 years. Rapid physical, intellectual and emotional development during adolescence creates foundations for civic engagement and social participation. In the cognitive sphere, the development of cause-and-effect thinking, abstract thinking and the onset of the formal operational stage enable young people to better understand social issues and processes, such as the nature of democracy. Intellectual development is accompanied by growing levels of self-awareness and self-perception. Young people cease to focus solely on the present, they set goals and tasks for the future and learn to organize their daily activities to meet those goals (Smykowski, 2009). Adolescents' focus on peer group activities gradually shifts to self-reflection and introspection. In addition to being members of peer groups, they become more active in the broader arena. They develop an interest in local and global social issues. The development of identity and integrity leads to the formation of new attitudes towards social roles. Young people become increasingly aware of the social roles they are expected to perform. They develop an interest in social systems, and they are more inclined to contribute to social progress and change, for example, by becoming active members of the student council. Young people become morally autonomous individuals, they learn to correctly identify and name emotions, which changes the way in which they interact with others. They no longer feel bound to other people, they experience unity with other human beings in a mature manner through acts of the intellect and moral responsibility that is rooted in will (Smykowski, 2009). The development of cognitive and social skills and growing levels of self-awareness suggest that young people's readiness to become involved in conventional political activities will increase between early and late adolescence.

Young people's involvement in community work and social campaigns seems to be a more complex issue. Early and mid-adolescents develop an acute interest in peer groups, and most of their energy is channeled to building social contacts within those groups. Young people learn to act with others and on behalf of others. During late adolescence, the focus shifts from the outer environment to the inner world and self-reflection. In terms of social behavior, the above promotes the establishment of deeper relations with fewer people. Late adolescents become more socially aware, and they take an interest in social issues that extend beyond the confines of the local community (Bee, 1998). Civic activities on behalf of other social groups do not always change during adolescence, but

different incentives and activating mechanisms could apply at every stage of adolescence.

Optimism

Optimism is regarded as a relatively fixed personality trait (Carver, 2000), and it is defined as the ability to formulate positive rather than negative perceptions of events and their underlying causes. Theoreticians have identified several types of optimisms, which differ in their extent, function and mechanisms. Global optimism is a positive attitude towards life and events in general, societal optimism applies to our perceptions of the local community, whereas personal optimism embodies our attitudes towards individual experiences (Siciński, 1972, Czapiński, 1985; Stach, 2006). Each type of optimism fulfils different functions. According to Erikson (1968), global optimism is most universally applicable, and it is associated with basic hope. Global optimism is the belief that the world and people are intrinsically good and can be trusted. This type of optimism is most closely associated with the willingness to live, and it is also referred to as essential optimism. An optimistic attitude towards personal events and one's immediate surroundings plays two key roles: it motivates people to take action, and it provides them with a sense of control over their lives and well-being. This type of optimism has a causative function. In reference to positive events, it entails the belief in success and encourages people to take action, which is why it is also known as expansive optimism. Defensive optimism, on the other hand, aims to minimise the risk of adverse events and threats. According to research, expansive optimism and defensive optimism are not correlated (Schwarzer, 1993; Taylor, 1989; Taylor, Brown, 1988).

This study investigated two types of optimism, essential optimism and expansive optimism, on the assumption that both can affect young people's perceptions of the world and their attitudes towards civic engagement. The second research question was formulated: 'Is one of type of optimism greater than the other? Is optimism linked with age and can any age-related patterns be identified?'

Essential and expansive optimism in children and adolescents has never been explored comprehensively. Studies of adults revealed that the levels of essential optimism in adults are lower than their personal optimism levels (Stach, 2006). The above can probably be attributed to our general belief that we are more able to control our own lives than other people's lives, which contributes to our sense of well-being (reduces negative emotions, increases the feeling of personal safety). Based on the above results, we can also expect young people to be more optimistic about their own lives and local affairs than other people's lives.

Optimism and civic activity

Optimism has adaptive functions by motivating people to act and increasing their sense of well-being (Czapiński, 2005; Seligman, 2002; Stach, 2006). Low levels of optimism are manifested by lack of persistence, lack of goal orientation and low level of task completion. Greater optimism motivates people to undertake various types of activity.

The above observations led to the formulation of the third research question: 'Is the level and type of optimism a good predictor of young people's civic engagement in adulthood?'

The objective of this study was to evaluate young people's perceptions of social problems. The study relies on the assumption that greater optimism contributes to young people's civic engagement and readiness for civic activity in adulthood. The results reported by Holden (2006, 2007) seem to confirm our assumption. In her study, British children surveyed in 2004 were not only more optimistic than children from the same age group who had been studied 10 years earlier, but they were also more politically aware and more willing to work for a change. The above results prompted our assumption that optimism, in particular societal optimism, facilitates civic engagement and readiness for active citizenship.

Methods

Surveyed group

The survey involved 2325 students from four countries: Poland (637), Great Britain (663), Spain (662) and Turkey (359) residing in capital cities (1042) or towns (1283). The respondents were divided into three age groups: early adolescents – aged 11 years (828), mid-adolescents – aged 14 years (857), and late adolescents – aged 18 years (640).

Survey procedures

The study was carried out in two stages. In the first stage, groups of students were asked to fill out a questionnaire. In the second stage, groups of 4-6 students representing every age group and every school were randomly selected and invited to participate in group interviews.

Tools

Stage 1 of the study was completed with the use of 2 tools.

TOOL 1: A questionnaire developed by Cathie Holden (2007), entitled 'What do you think about the future?' The respondents were asked to answer questions about their attitudes towards social issues such as violence, tolerance, poverty, health and the environment from two points of views:

- Essential optimism, e.g. 'Do you think there will be more or less violence in the world in the future than there is today?' Reliability measured with Cronbach's alpha (0.604) was not high, but it was sufficient to make group comparisons.

- Expansive optimism, e.g. 'Do you think that your local area will be more violent or less violent in the future than it is today?' Reliability was sufficient to make group comparisons (Cronbach's alpha = 0.629).

All questions were provided with specific two-pool 5-item scales, including answers: 1) much more, 2) a bit more, 3) about the same, 4) a bit less and 5) much less. For some questions, the answers were reverse scored, so that a higher score was indicative of greater optimism.

TOOL 2: A short questionnaire investigating the respondents' willingness to become citizens who take an active or semi-active interest in political and social issues: 'When you're an adult which of the following things do you think you might do? (Please circle one choice for each question)':

- Voting in election [an index of semi-active political citizenship]
- Talk about politics with friends [an index of semi-active political citizenship]
- Trying to be elected [an index of active political citizenship]
- Joining a political party [an index of active political citizenship]
- Joining a campaign/NGOs [an index of active civic citizenship].

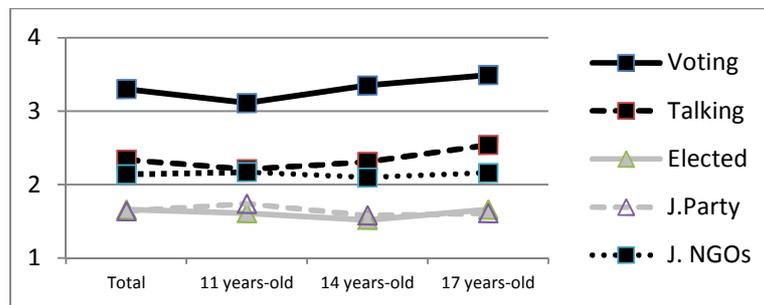
Each item was scored on a 4-point scale: definitely – possibly – not sure – no. All answers were reverse scored, so that higher values reflected greater readiness for undertaking a given form of citizenship activity.

In the second stage of the study, young people were asked about their understanding of social problems and their perceptions of the future during group interviews, e.g. 'What is violence? Why do you think your local area will be more violent (or less violent – if both answers were given, both questions were asked) in the future than it is today? Why do you think there will be more violence and conflict (or less violence and conflict – as above) in the future than there is today?' The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Results

Do the declared types of civic activities differ and are they linked with age? If so, what patterns can be identified?

Fig. 1. Declared civic activities and the respondents' age



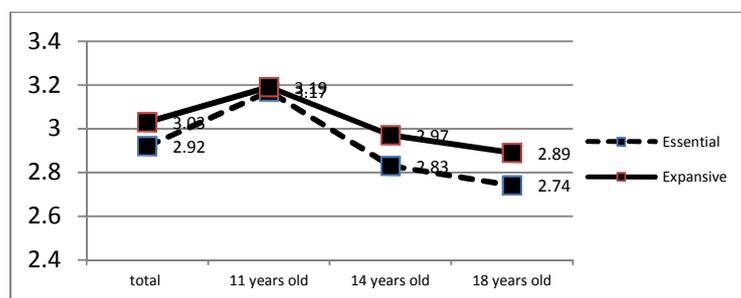
The results of the analysis of variance indicate that the interest in conventional civic activities, which entail a semi-active mode of engagement, increases with the respondents' age. Older students were more willing to vote in elections ($F(2.2333)=33.58, p<0.001$) and had a greater interest in political affairs ($F(2.2304)=17.95, p<0.001$). The respondents differed in their willingness to actively participate in political life. Their declared readiness to run for public office increased with age ($F(2.2297)=21.36, p<0.001$). Older students were more reluctant to join a political party, and 11-year-olds were more willing to join a political organization ($F(2.2314)=7.21, p<0.001$) than 14- and 18-year-olds (Fig. 1).

The willingness to work for social organizations did not change with the respondents' age.

Is one of type of optimism greater than the other? Is optimism linked with age and can any age-related patterns be identified?

The results of the analysis confirmed our expectations. The respondents demonstrated lower levels of essential optimism [$M=2.92$] than expansive optimism [3.03] $t=7.88; p<0.001$.

Fig. 2. Essential and expansive optimism and the respondents' age



Both types of optimism – expansive optimism, which is an expression of the respondents' attitudes towards local future ($F(2/2472)=38.172; p<0.001$), and essential

optimism, which is a reflection on the respondents' perceptions of global future ($F(2/2460)=77.10$; $p<0.001$) – were correlated with age. The youngest respondents were most optimistic (Fig. 2). The level of optimism among younger and older students can be inferred from the responses given during group interviews. 11-year-olds were of the opinion that human beings are inherently good, but they were unable to justify that belief. They were also convinced that humans have limitless possibilities:

I think the world will be less violent (...) People will stop being violent and they will become better... maybe they will see that this is not the right way to behave, and they will change... (Girl, 11, about VIOLENCE)

I think there will be less unemployment. If we can create new jobs on other planets and send the unemployed there, they could work there. They could build houses because, in my opinion, the Universe is worth visiting. There is always the risk that something will break, that a wing will fall off during the launch of a space shuttle, and then you need some money, and you get it... so I think that there will be less unemployment. (Boy, 11 about UNEMPLOYMENT)

In younger children, optimism is related to imagination and has the features of unrealistic optimism. Older respondents were able to back their opinions with specific experiences. They were aware that life events can be complex, ambiguous and determined by one's motivation, individual situation, the social context and the law:

It depends on our generation, if we try or not. If there is education, if people want to learn and get degrees, it will be easier for them to find jobs. There will be money... It also depends on motivation, if they don't have it, it's on them. If people have money, they don't care about others, they simply live their own lives and don't want to change anything.' (Girl, 14, about POVERTY)

It depends on the way the state is heading, if it will be better or worse. How the social security system will develop. Our government doesn't do anything. People would emigrate to England or Ireland in search of work than stay in Poland. (Boy, 17, about POVERTY)

Optimism becomes more realistic with age, and the age-related drop in optimism levels can be attributed to mature thinking and a better understanding of social processes.

Is the level and type of optimism correlated with young people's willingness to become involved in political and social activities in adulthood?

An analysis of correlations between social activity and the two types of optimism revealed weak and incidental dependencies: the lower the level of optimism the greater the interest in politics. The respondents' willingness to run for public office was correlated only with essential optimism. The remaining types of civic activities – voting in elections, joining a political party and working for social causes – were not correlated with the level of optimism (Table 1).

Table 1. Significant correlations between the examined types of optimism and the respondents' willingness to actively participate in civic life in adulthood

Citizenship activity	Essential optimism	Expansive optimism
Talking about politics	-0.064**	-0.046*
Voting	-0.012	0.014
Joining a party	0.024	-0.017
Trying to be elected	0.066**	-0.011
Campaign /NGO	-0.001	-0.011

Correlations are significant at * $p < 0,05$, ** $p < 0,001$

Conclusions

The objective of this study was to analyse adolescents' willingness to undertake various types of civic activities in adulthood and to determine the correlations between the respondents' declarations and their optimism levels.

The study also aimed to verify the assumption that adolescents' willingness to participate in conventional civic activities increases with age. This assumption was only partially confirmed. The surveyed adolescents were most inclined towards occasional and semi-active forms of civic participation. Their interest in politics and willingness to talk about politics increased with age. Respondents approaching the voting age were more willing to vote in elections. Voting in elections was the most readily declared form of civic activity. The respondents were far less interested in taking an active part in political life. The average score in answers surveying the students' willingness to join a political party or run for public office was 1.64 (no – 1 point, not sure – 2 points). Our results corroborate the findings of other researchers who observed that young people were increasingly alienated from political life in many European countries (see, for example, Moravsci, 2004; Avbelj, 2005; Mitchell, 2005; Hirschhorn, 2006) and who predicted the gradual 'death of politics'. Those observations raise many questions about the quality of politics and the process of recruiting young people to this area of public life. Sociological research (Młodzi, 2011) demonstrated that young people have a deep distrust of politics and politicians. In our study, young people's trust did not decrease with age because it was already low among primary school students. Our findings indicate that adolescents are willing to perform their civic duties only occasionally, and they are not interested in participating in political life.

In an analysis of the respondents' levels of optimism, we were guided by the results of a survey conducted on adults, and we expected adolescents to display higher levels of expansive than essential optimism. The results of the study confirmed our expectations and revealed a drop in the levels of both expansive and essential optimism with age. The belief that the world is intrinsically good and that local affairs are 'heading in the right direction' decreases during adolescence. The noted decrease in the levels of essential optimism could result from the loss of unconditional faith in the goodness of human nature, the growing importance of critical thinking, a better understanding of complex

social processes and the loss of unjustified belief that things will run smoothly in the future. The level of expansive optimism also decreases with age, and older respondents turn into more realistic optimists. Older respondents have a less optimistic outlook for the future, but they are capable of proposing rational solutions to social and political problems.

Optimism and civic activity were weakly correlated, and we were unable to identify any mechanisms responsible for the noted results. The assumptions that optimism is a driver of civic engagement were not confirmed. The noted correlations were weak and actually disproved our expectations. Respondents who scored low on both types of optimism expressed an interest in politics, but their interest did not translate into the willingness to participate in civic activities in adulthood. A possible explanation for the above is that 'optimistic' youths are more focused on personal problems and regard civic activities as a duty that needs to be fulfilled rather than an important element of a young person's life.

Despite an absence of correlations between optimism levels and civic engagement, further work is needed to find other personality traits that contribute to young people's eagerness to actively participate in various forms of civic life.

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