

# Disaggregating Civic and Community Involvement in Middle-Class African American Adolescents

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# Abstract

This study examines different forms of civic involvement and activity in a sample of middle-class African American adolescents. Data were collected in the third wave of a 5-year longitudinal study (Smetana & Gaines, 1999 for a description of the Time 1 sample). 76 late adolescents ( $M = 18.42$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ) completed a 14-item checklist of Current and Future Civic engagement including participation in African American community organizations. Principal components analyses yielded three factors representing distinct ways in which adolescents could become engaged: through political activism, in community groups, and within the church. Adolescents rated their future involvement significantly higher than their current involvement. Each of the three factors was found to have unique correlates. Current political activism was associated with the adolescent being in college after account for age. Current and future church involvement was associated with spirituality, and current and future community involvement was associated with ethnic identity.

## Introduction

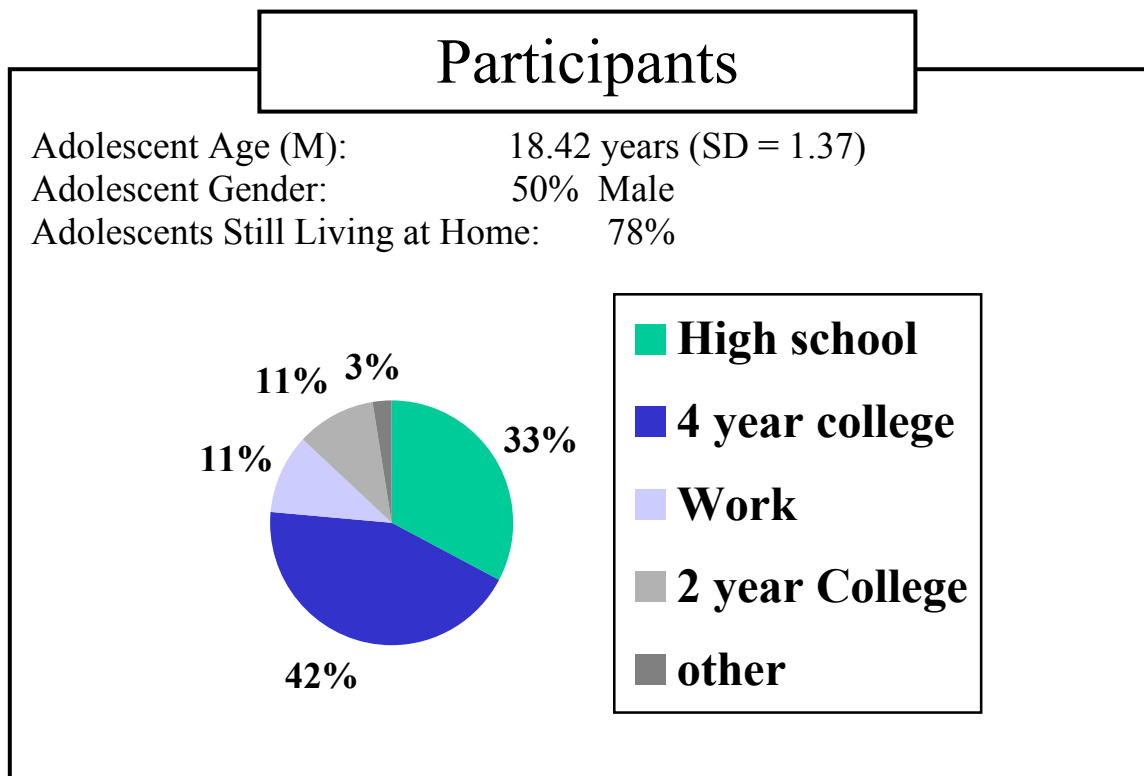
Research in adolescent civic engagement has moved towards specifying different dimensions of adolescent civic engagement to better understand its developmental impacts. It has been theorized that accounting for the various types of youth civic activity and adolescents' motivation for becoming involved will lead to a better understanding of the proposed benefits to civic development. Thus far, the research has examined the distinction between social cause service and other forms of voluntary action (Metz, McLellan, & Youniss, 2003).

**Aim 1: Evaluate a measure of civic and community involvement to determine whether meaningful categories of youth civic engagement could be empirically derived.**

Adolescent civic engagement involves more than volunteering, but there have been few attempts to differentiate among other facets of civic behavior. Adolescents are involved in community organizations and clubs, high school government, and church organized activities (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). Older adolescents may become involved actively in political movements and organizations (Torney-Purta, 1990).

**Aim 2: Determine if differential categories of civic involvement are associated with concurrent demographic and psychological variables including spirituality and ethnic identity.**

Research concerned with the correlates of civic involvement and volunteering has focused on global dimensions of volunteering. This research has indicated that socioeconomic status and intent to enroll in college are associated with adolescent volunteerism (Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, Snyder, 1999), and that religiosity is associated with community service (Youniss, McLellan, and Yates, 1999). Previous research has not fully examined whether different forms of civic engagement in African American adolescents are associated with psychological variables such as ethnic identity.



## Procedures

Families were recruited through African American churches and professional/social organizations. (see Smetana & Gaines, 1999).

Adolescents responded to a packet of questionnaires as part of the University of Rochester Youth and Family Project.

# Measures

## **Current and Future Activities Checklist**

-14 item measure adapted from Youniss et al. (1997) to include items pertaining to African American organizations and Church involvement.

-Ratings of Current and Future activity

CURRENT (1) = not at all - (5) = All the time

FUTURE (1) = no chance - (5) = I will

## **Spirituality**

-8 items (Seidlitz, et al., 1999)

-6 point scale (1) strongly disagree - (6) strongly agree

## **Ethnic Identity**

-14 items Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992) adapted for African Americans.

- 4 point scale, (1) = strongly disagree -  
(4) = strongly agree

## **Perceptions of Racism**

-5 item scale (Phinney & Chavira, 1995)

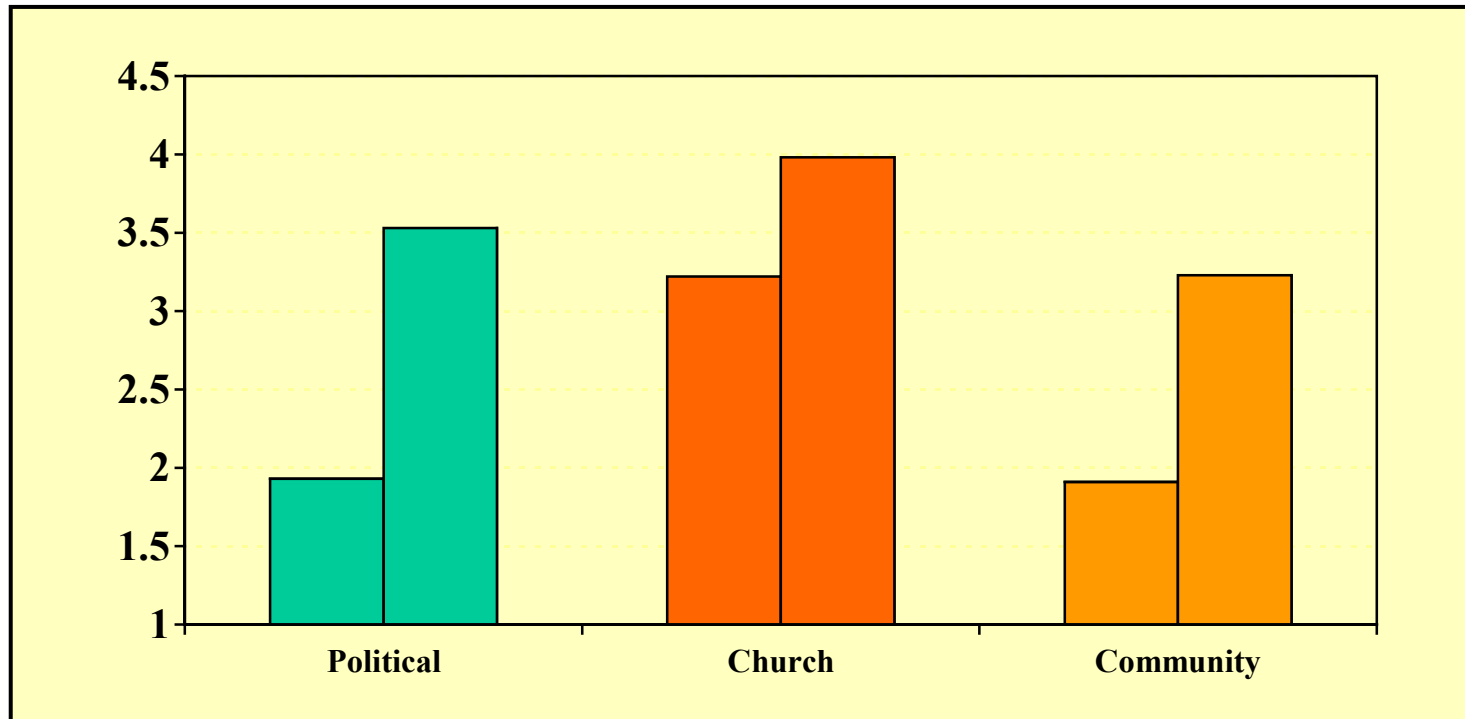
-5 point scale (1) = almost never - (4) = very often

# Aim 1

## Differentiating Forms of Civic Engagement

Principal component analyses with varimax rotation were run on the Current and Future Activities measure

Activity Items	Political		Church		Community	
	Current	Future	Current	Future	Current	Future
Vote	.49	.58				
Demonstrate Publicly for a cause	.72	.62				
Boycott a Product or Service	.63	.77				
Write a letter to a newspaper about an issue	.43	.70				
Make a statement at a public meeting.	.59	.49				.42
Sign a petition for a cause	.71	.60				
Attend church religious service			.87	.86		
Participate in church community service activities			.87	.86		
Participate in church social activities			.92	.91		
Work on a political campaign					.49	.59
Join a civic organization (Rotary Club, YMCA)					.58	.77
Join an African American Social group (Links, etc.)					.89	.84
Join an African American community or political organization					.82	.85
*Volunteer or do community service	.40	.63	.37		.34	
Eigenvalues	1.39	5.29	2.08	2.29	4.43	2.03
Variance accounted for by each factor:	10.0%	40.0%	14.9%	9.2%	31.6%	14.5%



2 (gender) X 3 (type of involvement) x 2 (current/future) repeated measures ANOVA showed that adolescents rated their future involvement higher than their current involvement  $F(5,70) = 88.99$ ,  $p < .001$ .

	Current			Future	
	Active	Community	Church	Political	Community
Current Community Involvement	.42*	-			
Current Church Activities	.23*	.19	-		
Future Active Political	.45**	.34**	.29*	-	
Future Community Involvement	.28*	.64**	.10	.52**	-
Future Church Activities	.09	.14	.70**	.41**	.27*

## Aim 2

## Examine Demographic and Psychological Correlates

	Current Activities			Future Activities		
Correlate	Active Political	Community Involvement	Church Activities	Active Political	Community Involvement	Church Activities
Adolescent Gender (^)	.14	.07	.26*	.28*	.14	.17
Mothers' Years of education	.07	.07	-.01	.01	.20+	.11
Age	.24*	-.04	-.15	-.05	-.06	-.03
Enrollment in 4-year college (\$)	.34**	.18	-.03	.23*	.23*	.01
Spirituality	.18	.21+	.41**	.58**	.41**	.62**
Ethnic Identity	.19	.35**	.28*	.52**	.55*	.37**
Experience with Racism	.06	.25*	-.03	.06	.23*	-.05

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$   
(^) Gender coded: (female 1, male 0)  
(\$) Enrollment coded: (enrolled in 4 year college or university 1, not enrolled 0)

### Political

	Current			Future		
	Beta	R <sup>2</sup>	F change	Beta	R <sup>2</sup>	F change
Step 1		.14	<b>3.93*</b>		.10	2.76
Age	.04			-.15		
Gender	.13			.19		
Enrolled in College	<b>.32*</b>			<b>.28*</b>		
Step 2		.17	1.06		<b>.38</b>	<b>16.27**</b>
Ethnic Identity	.17			<b>.30*</b>		
Spirituality	.06			<b>.44*</b>		
Perception of Racism	-.03			-.05		

### Church

	Current			Future		
	Beta	R <sup>2</sup>	F change	Beta	R <sup>2</sup>	F change
Step 1		<b>.10</b>	<b>2.65*</b>		.02	.55
Age	-.22			-.11		
Gender	<b>.26*</b>			.12		
Enrolled in College	.04			.06		
Step 2		<b>.25</b>	<b>4.46*</b>		<b>.40</b>	<b>13.71**</b>
Ethnic Identity	.16			.13		
Spirituality	<b>.30*</b>			<b>.56**</b>		
Perception of Racism	-.08			-.12		

### Community

	Current			Future		
	Beta	R <sup>2</sup>	F change	Beta	R <sup>2</sup>	F change
Step 1		.07	1.67		<b>.14*</b>	<b>3.63*</b>
Age	-.16			<b>-.27*</b>		
Gender	.10			.14		
Enrolled in College	<b>.25*</b>			<b>.34*</b>		
Step 2		.19	<b>3.83*</b>		<b>.45</b>	<b>12.49**</b>
Ethnic Identity	<b>.26*</b>			<b>.47**</b>		
Spirituality	.03			.11		
Perception of Racism	.17			.10		



# Discussion

## **Three distinct factors, church activities, active political engagement, and community involvement emerged from the principal components analyses.**

These factors can be seen forming a continuum ranging from local activity in the church and community to broader involvement with political and social causes. Both the church and community involvement seem to indicate a more communal, or group orientation to civic activity. The differentiation of church from membership in other community organizations, including African American associations, may reflect the central role of the church within the African American community (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Additionally, adolescents rated their future involvement as significantly higher than their current involvement, though the same factors emerged for current and future activities.

## **There were different demographic and psychological correlates for each form of civic involvement.**

In this African American sample, active political involvement was associated with college enrollment, after accounting for age. College may provide a greater opportunity for African American adolescents to become involved politically, and adolescents who go on to college may have a greater sense of agency than those who do not, leading to their greater political involvement. Spirituality was associated with church involvement, as well as future community involvement. Ethnic identity and experiences with racism were associated with community involvement. Phinney and Onwunghalu (1996) found that increased ethnic identity was associated with a decrease in African American adolescents' views that prototypical American ideals were applicable to them. Future research needs to determine the possibility that an increased sense of one's ethnicity may make adolescents more aware of the needs within the African American community, which in turn lead them to focus their civic and service involvement efforts at that level.

Future research should examine the generalizability of these findings to other samples of African American adolescents and with a broader set of items. Additionally, future research on African American civic involvement will be needed to further explore the relationship between spirituality, ethnic identity, and specific forms of civic engagement.

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