

basic theories of civic development

Peter Levine / July 2012

I am spending these two weeks co-teaching the [Summer Institute of Civic Studies](#). We will cover 18 separate topics, and I will blog about roughly half of them.

Yesterday afternoon's discussion focused on **children and youth, civic education, and human development, more generally**. We had assigned the following readings on those topics:

- David Elkind, "Erik Erikson's Eight Ages of Man." ([NY Times article](#) from 1970)
- Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations" (excerpt)
- Joel Westheimer and Joseph E. Kahne, "Educating the 'Good Citizen': Political Choices and Pedagogical Goals"
- Hugh McIntosh and James Youniss, "Toward a Political Theory of Political Socialization of Youth."

Why does youth and education require attention in a course that is about [how citizens can improve the world](#)? I would say we need to give special attention to youth because:

1. What it means to be a "good citizen" depends on how old you are—the answer is different if you are 8 or 80.
2. People don't automatically learn to be good citizens; that has to be taught, which raises difficult issues. (Who has a right to decide that they should learn? How should the state relate to parents if they have different goals?)
3. A fundamental fact about any society is that people are always entering (without memories, skills, and experience), and also exiting when they have reached the maximum of human experience. So designing a good society that engages its people in governance must take into account the life cycle.

In 1999, the great political scientist Sir Bernard Crick lamented that "there is no political Piaget." He meant that there was no major theorist who provided a framework for understanding children's development into citizens. Such a theory would help institutions to educate children civically, which, in turn, would strengthen democracy.

Although we don't have a "political Piaget," several major thinkers offer valuable theoretical frameworks. Before we turn to a few of those thinkers, I'd like to introduce a distinction that is often used when interpreting data on youth engagement:

- *An historical effect* is the consequence of experiencing an event, regardless of your age at the time. For example, we are all experiencing the 2012 presidential campaign right now.
- *An age effect* (or life cycle effect) is the result of being at a certain point in one's life. For example, people who are eight years old at any given moment

in history are less interested in sex than people who are 21 at the same moment.

- *A cohort effect* (or generation effect) is the lasting consequence of going through an event when one was young. For example, people who experienced World War II have differed from other generations all their lives.

When we observe that only 24% of eligible young people voted in 2010, we can ask whether that is an historical effect, an age effect, or a cohort effect. The answer will make a lot of difference to how we respond.

For our purposes today, we are not interested in historical effects. For age effects, a classical theorist is the Freudian psychologist Erik Erikson (1902-1994). Generational effects were invented and explored by the sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893-1947).

Erikson's stage theory

Erikson was second-generation Freudian, a friend of Anna Freud. Like Freud, he connected age ranges to developmental stages. But his stages were “psychosocial,” involving relationships between the individual and society. (I.e., not just sex and the family drama.) For him, the stages continue over the whole of a life, not ending with puberty. He studied Sioux and Asian Indians, among others, and claimed that the developmental stages are basically invariant across cultures. Each has positive and negative features that are opposites of each other. For example, the last stage of life offers either “integrity” or “despair,” and the task of being old is to attain integrity.

For civic development, the key Eriksonian stage is Identity versus Role Confusion, normally experienced between the ages of 12-18. Adolescents can for the first time compare their own families to ideal families and societies. So they put their Oedipal conflict (and other family dramas) in a social context. Their basic task is to form an integrated identity that makes sense of their relationship to the larger society. Each adolescent falls on a spectrum from role confusion to ego identity. Achieving a stable identity is a successful outcome of adolescence. Sometimes you have to go through an identity crisis (Erikson's most famous phrase), which is an episode of trying to “find yourself.”

Questions for discussion:

- What do we think of stage theories in general?
- What does Erikson's theory of adolescence imply for civic engagement?
- What is a good outcome of adolescence from a civic perspective?
- Is psychosocial wellbeing desirable from a civic perspective? (Even in an unjust society?)

Youniss' critique of classical psychology

James Youniss is a developmental psychologist who worked with Jürgen Habermas and draws on philosophy and political science. Some key premises in the McIntosh and Youniss chapter:

- Civic identity is not just cognitive and affective (what you know and think), but also behavioral (what you do).
- Civic development is not individual, having to do with the human being's growth and change. It is public and political, involving membership and participation.
- Political participation involves collaboration and conflict and is voluntary (in societies like ours).

Implications:

- The course of civic development depends on the institutions that provide political opportunities for youth
- Good civic education is experiential, and the valuable experiences are political (involving collaboration and conflict)
- The context around institutions matters, so, for instance, civic education should be different for poor and rich kids.
- Often, recruitment leads to experience, which develops beliefs and values. (This is importantly different from the common assumption that people hold values, which lead them to engage or not engage. For example, turnout statistics are usually interpreted as a manifestation of apathy or ignorance, rather than an outcome of weak recruitment.)

Mannheim's Theory of Generations

Mannheim says (near the end of the assigned chapter) that his theory is dynamic and historical, in explicit contrast to psychoanalysis, which posits constant, natural processes.

In contrast to an imaginary world in which people live forever, our societies are characterized by the fact that new people are always arriving and old ones exiting. So it is necessary to transmit social norms, and society is regenerated by fresh contact.

Mannheim thinks that replacement is a beneficial process:

Cultural creation and cultural accumulation are not accomplished by the same individuals—instead, we have the continuous emergence of new age groups. This means ... that our culture is developed by individuals who come into contact anew with the accumulated heritage. ... The continuous emergence of new human beings in our own society acts as compensation for the restricted and partial nature of the individual consciousness. ... A human race living on forever would have to learn to forget to compensate for the lack of new generations.

He emphasizes that our early experiences permanently shape our civic ideas and identities:

Even if the rest of one's life consisted in one long process of negation and destruction of the natural worldview acquired in youth, the determining influence of these early impressions would still be predominant. For even in negation our orientation is fundamentally centered upon that which is being negated, and we are thus still unwittingly determined by it.

As in Erikson, adolescence is a crucial period:

The possibility of really questioning and reflecting on things only emerges at the point where personal experimentation with life begins—round about the age of seventeen, sometimes a little earlier and sometimes a little later.

Because our ideas and memories build up over time, experience is “stratified.” That means that two people who experience the same event at different stages of life will integrate it differently in their consciousness:

Early impressions tend to coalesce into a natural view of the world. All later experiences then tend to receive their meaning from this original set, whether they appear as that set’s verification and fulfillment or as its negation and antithesis.

But babies are born every second, and two individuals born at the same time may have different formative experiences. In what sense, then, is a generation a meaningful unit?

A generation is composed of “youth experiencing the same concrete historical problems.” But “groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways, constitute separate generation units.” For example, “Those who were young about 1810 in Germany constituted one actual generation whether they adhered to the then current version of liberal or conservative ideas. But in so far as they were conservative or liberal, they belonged to different units of that actual generation.”

Not every generation location—not even every age group—creates new collective impulses and formative principles original to itself and adequate to its particular situation. Where this does happen, we shall speak of a realization of potentialities inherent in the location. We speak in such cases of the formation of a new generation style, or of a new generation entelechy.

Questions for discussion:

- Are “Millennials” a generation?
- What should we do to enhance the beneficial aspects of generational replacement?

Westheimer and Kahne

They posit that three different theories of civic education undergird actual programs, and the outcomes differ depending on the theory. Those are:

- The personally responsible citizen
- The participatory citizen
- The Justice-oriented citizen

Discussion questions:

- What are these theories?

- Are all appropriate for all ages and all populations?
- Do Kahne and Westheimer have a moral preference?
- Is it right?
- Who should decide which kind of civic education youth experience?

Note: the justice-oriented citizen seeks “structural explanations for social problems.” That raises a rather deep question about structure. We will later read a radical theorist, Roberto Unger, who argues that the framework of structure versus superstructure is a fatal mistake.