

Political socialization of the youth: an examination of the family as an agency for youth citizenship in South Africa

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Abstract

This study examined the role of the family in the political socialization of the youth. Two hundred and seventy-five (275) youth completed the self-administered questionnaire that was adapted from the Afrobarometer Round 4. The results show that significant positive relationships between parent-adolescent communication and family active citizenship, youth active citizenship and political attitudes of the youth exist. Family active citizenship was also significantly positively related to active citizenship. Two separate hierarchical regression analyses were conducted. Model 1 predicted active citizenship of youth with the final model accounting for 11% of the variance for youth active citizenship. In Model 2, using political attitudes as the predictor, the final model accounted for 26% of the variance of political attitudes of youth.

Introduction

The construct of political socialization refers to the developmental processes through which individuals acquire political attitudes and behaviours (Easton, 1968, p. 125). While the focus on socialization can be traced back to the early 20th century (Niemi & Sobieszek, 1977), it was first assigned the name 'political socialization' in the mid-20th century when Hyman (1959) examined more closely the effect of agency on the social integration of individuals into political activities. In particular, he referred to the 'learning of social patterns corresponding to [individuals] societal positions as mediated through various agencies of society' (cited in Sapiro, 2004, p. 3). Hyman's work brought to the fore, amongst other things, the important role of the family as a socializing agent in the life of the young child. Upon this basis many scholars (Jennings, 1983; Gelles, 1995; Galston, 2001; Cicognani, Zani, Fournier, Gavray, & Born, 2012; Andolina,

Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeter, 2003; Flanagan, 2003 & 2009; Quintelier, 2013), have conducted empirical studies on the family that clearly suggests its influence on the political attitudes and behaviours of the adolescent child.

Notwithstanding this emphasis, the increasing disengagement and disinterest of the youth in political activities potentially threatens the substance of democracy (Kahne and Sporte 2008; Sloam 2011). Flanagan (2003, p. 257), in her work on the developmental antecedents of the political and civic engagement of adults, points to increasing concerns about the political stability of the younger generation. Moreover, the arguably changing citizen orientations toward government has resulted in citizens becoming more sceptical of politics, more disconnected from political parties, and more prone to unconventional forms of political participation (Dalton, 2000, p. 917). In emerging democracies such as South Africa, for example, marginalized and poor communities have opted out of politics altogether and do not participate in either state created or 'self-created' structures. In fact, many marginalized communities have resorted to forms of participation that have resulted in violent, and in some instances, fatal confrontation with the police (Sosibo, 01 November 2013; Van Schie 06 February 2014; SAPA, 06 February 2014; Mail and Guardian 10 February 2014). Moreover, the consequence of these behaviours and attitudes may have a negative influence on the attitudes and behaviours of the future generation of citizens (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schultz (2001, p. 12); Dalton, 2000; Cicognani et al, 2012, p. 2; Sapiro, 2004, p. 3).

The family as a socializing agency

Against this background the role of the family as a socializing agent is of particular interest in the context of emerging democracies. Much of the scholarly debates and empirical studies are largely based on the experiences of developed countries in the North such as the United States of America, Europe and Australasia. In the case of South Africa where some work has been conducted on socialization, much of the debate has centred on the role of schools in the political socialization of the youth (see

Finchilescru & Dawes, 1998; Finkel & Ernst, 2005; Mattes & Mughogho, 2009; Hunt, 2011; Mattes, Denmark, & Niemi, 2012) and social mobilisation of communities in general through civic organizations, community leadership and networks (see Cornwall, 2004; Kabeer, 2005; the volume of Thompson & Tapscott, 2010; Gaventa & Barrett, 2010; Tapscott, 2011; Serafim & Oliveira, 2011). Nonetheless, there is an emerging awareness of the valuable role that families can play in the South African society. However, while the White Paper on Families in South Africa (RSA 2012), illustrates this growing consciousness, it is premised on the family as the genesis of dysfunctional behavior (RSA Parliament White Paper on Families in South Africa 2012, p. 8), rather than a nurturing space (*our emphasis*) for active citizenship.

Political socialization in the family

Essentially, socialization refers to a process of raising awareness in the life of an individual through wide ranging agencies that influence the attitudes and behaviours of that individual in various stages of his/her life. In particular, it is argued that the family has a fundamental role to play in nurturing and shaping these attitudes and behaviours in the formative life of the young child. In fact Gelles in elaborating this emphasis (1995) states that:-

Socialization is the process whereby one acquires a sense of personal identity and learns what people in the surrounding culture believe and how they expect one to behave. Through socialization a helpless infant is gradually transformed into a more or less knowledgeable, more or less cooperative member of society. Parents are the primary agents of socialization, and the family is the major setting for socialization (p.290).

Andolina, et al (2003) share similar views when they describe the family environment as the primary space for learning important lessons of engagement. In particular they refer to the role that the family plays in politically conscientizing the child. They observe that young adults who grow up in a home where political discussions occur regularly are much

more involved in a host of political activities (Andolina, et al 2003, p. 277). Their research revealed that among young people who were eligible to vote, 38% of those who responded that they always vote were from homes who frequently discussed political matters. This was compared to 20% of those who did not engage in political discussions in the home. Likewise, 35% of those who often heard political discussions while growing up were regular volunteers. Whereas, in homes where political discussions never occurred, only 15% responded that they regularly volunteered. Andolina, et al (2003) are of the opinion that the family provides the springboard for the next political activity through “talking about politics [and teaching] their children that it is important to pay attention to the world around them” (p.277).

The work of Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs (2004), while not specifically focusing on parent-adolescent discussions per se, highlights the importance of discussing politics on the development of attitudes and behaviours of citizenship. In their conceptualization of discursive participation (their definition for talking politics) they accentuate the activity of talking, discussing, debating, and/or deliberating with other citizens (Delli Carpini, et al, 2004, p. 318). However, they argue that in spite of the values inherent in talking politics it is not awarded the same importance as is activities such as voting, attending rallies, working for a political party, protesting, and so on (Delli Carpini, et al, 2004, pp. 318-319). Arguably, they observe the value of discursive participation in affording individuals the opportunity to “develop and express their views, learn the positions of others, identify shared concerns and preferences, and come to reach judgements about matters of public concern” (Delli Carpini, et al, 2004, p. 319).

Quintelier (2013) observes the influence of diverse socializing agents on the attitudes and behaviours of the youth. Her study yields a number of interesting findings on political socialization. Amongst other things it shows that discussing politics with parents is correlated to higher levels of political participation (Quintelier, 2013, p. 7). Moreover, that politically active family is positively correlated to political participation of adolescents. In addition she argues that the micro-level influences that the

child is exposed to shapes the attitudes and behaviours of the child in his/her meso and macro environment. In other words, children engaged in political discussions in the home and whose parents are politically active parents are more likely to participate in political discussions at school and with peers (Quintelier, 2013, p. 2). Cicognani, et al (2012) consider the affective-behavioural dimension of citizenship in their examination of the effects of parents who participate in protests and civic volunteering on their children's participation in protest and other forms of civic engagement. Similarly, but more recently the work of Geboers, Geijsel, Admiraal, and ten Dam, (2014, p. 514) alludes to the influence of daily activities of citizenship on values beliefs, attitudes and behaviours (affective-behavioural dimension), amongst others, of young people.

Gleaning from the above it is clear the family is an important and foundational agency of socialization for the young child. More particularly, the child's experiences and perceptions of political life are influenced by practices such as engaging in political discussions or observing family members exercise behaviours of citizenship (voting, community organization members). Therefore we understand youth active citizenship to refer to the participation of young people in political activities that include political discussions, community based organizations and/or association with political parties. Taking cognisance of the aforementioned debates on the role of the family, exploring what is happening in the family insofar as political discussions and practices are concerned is important in the context of an emerging democracy such as South Africa. More particularly the dearth of scholarly research in this area on the case of South Africa accentuates the need to understand the role of the family in the political socialization of the youth.

A conceptual framework for political socialization and the family

Easton's early analysis of political systems (1957) provides a useful paradigm within which to explore the role of the family in the political socialization of the youth. At a general level, he recognizes the interrelated, yet separate function of various agencies in the policy making and

implementation process (Easton 1957, p. 383). He argues that one has to understand the functioning of the whole to understand the functioning of one part, as each is a part of the 'larger political canvas'(ibid). Accordingly, he views political life as a system of interrelated activities and agencies that, in one way or another, influence authoritative decision making processes (1957 p. 384). In his analysis he systematically examines the various influences that comprise a political system through the 'input-process-output' formula. In Easton's perspective therefore, various inputs that emanate from the environment within which the political system operates places demands on and/or creates support for that political system. Accordingly, the needs and wants of citizens are considered the 'demand' inputs that the political system has to process in order to produce desired outputs that manifest as services, social welfare entitlements and so on.

'Support' inputs, on the other hand, refer to the behaviours or attitudes of citizens that allow the political system to process demands into desired outputs (Miller 1971). In examining various inputs into the political system Easton refers to supportive behaviours such as external actions and/or internal orientations or attitudes that predispose support for a political system. We can infer that supportive behaviours are inculcated through the process of political socialization and manifest in one of two ways. In the first instance, and based on a political system that responds to the needs of the people, the satisfied citizenry will support the political system through its 'loyal' vote and/or participating in the political structures, processes and institutions of the government of the day. In the second instance one generation transfers to another certain political ideologies and beliefs that influence the attitudes of the latter and predisposes it to a particular political system. Therefore, and at a more specific level, Easton's analysis of political systems raises awareness of the family as an important agency of socialization to political life either through its engagement with participatory institutions and structures (the active exercise of citizenship) or through discursive behaviours (political discussions). Thus the family as an input of support of the political system enables the assimilation of prevailing culture, attitudes and behaviours that may foster a practice of citizenship towards strengthening the quality of democracy. In the context of emerging democracies the preservation and maintenance of the 'new'

political order is of crucial importance to the survival and quality of democracy. Accordingly, learning behaviours of citizenship at an early age contributes to the preservation of the democratic political system (Easton, 1968).

With this context in mind we examined the relationship between (1) parent-adolescent communication, family active citizenship and youth active citizenship; (2) parent-adolescent communication, family active citizenship and youth political attitudes; and (3) the predictive effects of the variables on youth active citizenship and political attitudes.

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 275 youth, 47% ($n=128$) male and 53.5% ($n=147$) female youth. The mean age was 16.11 years ranging between 13 and 22 years. The majority of participants were in Grade 10 (46%). The home languages were English (55%) and Afrikaans (44%). Ninety-eight percent ($n =268$) identified themselves as a Coloured (mixed) race group. In terms of living arrangements, 50% lived in a two-parent family and 40% lived in a one-parent family, with their mothers.

Instrument

The Afrobarometer Round 4 was adapted and additional items were added to create a self-administered questionnaire to collect the data. Items in the questionnaire included demographic information of participants, discussions in the family and with parents in terms of political discussions. Participants were asked to respond on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree. Items also included demographic information such as gender, age, ethnicity, education level and living arrangements.

Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was provided by the institutional review board. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and ethical considerations of the study which included anonymity, voluntary participation and confidentiality. No form of payment for participation was provided. Trained research assistants administered the questionnaires to the youth after obtaining informed consent. In this way, low literacy levels and missing data were accommodated for.

The area of Bonteheuwel was chosen as the study site. Bonteheuwel is a township on the Cape Flats, in South Africa, which was developed during apartheid to which people were forcibly removed. People living in Bonteheuwel, especially youth, were known for their militancy against the apartheid state and the assumption is that families were very involved in political discussions in the family. Post-1994 we would like to know, inter alia, whether these family discussions are existing. We obtained a street map of Bonteheuwel from the City of Cape and demarcated the area based on the two entry and exit points into the area. We then dissected Bonteheuwel into four sub-areas using the entry points into Bonteheuwel. The sub-areas were further into smaller sub-areas. We then identified every second street and every 10th to 15th household based on voluntary participation.

Analysis

The data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) V21. Preliminary analysis included descriptive statistics. Relationships between the variables were determined through the Pearson Test for correlations and the prediction of variables were done through hierarchical regression analyses. Thus two hierarchical regression analyses were conducted that is one with active citizenship and the other with political attitudes of youth. In both regression analyses parent-adolescent communication was entered first and family active citizenship was entered next. The reason for this choice was to determine the predictive value of parent-adolescent communication first as a more proximal variable than family active citizenship.

Results

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of youth political socialization within the family

| Study variables | Minimum | Maximum | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Parent Adolescent communication | 20.00 | 52.00 | 36.55 | 5.08 |
| Family Active Citizenship | 3.00 | 14.00 | 9.04 | 1.64 |
| Youth Active Citizenship | 10.00 | 25.00 | 19.62 | 2.42 |
| Youth Political Attitude | 16.00 | 36.00 | 25.34 | 3.69 |

Total Score Parent-Adolescent Communication = Minimum 12 and Maximum 60

Total Score Family Active Citizenship = Minimum 3 and Maximum 15

Total Score Youth Active Citizenship = Minimum 5 and Maximum 25

Total Score Youth Political Attitude = Minimum 8 and Maximum 40

The results in Table 1 suggest that parents and their adolescents are communicating ($M = 36.55$; $SD = 5.08$) in the family in terms of political discussions. For family active citizenship, the majority of families were fairly active ($M = 9.04$; $SD = 1.64$). In terms of youth being active citizens, the results show that the majority of youth are being active citizens ($M = 19.62$; $SD = 2.42$) and have a fairly strong political attitude ($M = 25.34$; $SD = 3.69$).

Table 2: Bivariate correlations of the study's variables as perceived by Youth

| Study variables | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| Parent Adolescent communication | - | - | - |
| Family Active Citizenship | .47** | - | - |
| Youth Active Citizenship | .20** | .23** | - |
| Youth Political Attitude | .46** | .35** | .48** |

** $p < .01$

Significant positive relationships were found between parent - adolescent communication and family active citizenship ($r = .47, p < .01$), youth active citizenship ($r = .20, p < .01$) and the political attitude of youth ($r = .46, p < .01$). Family Active citizenship was also significantly positively related to active citizenship ($r = .23, p < .01$) and political attitudes ($r = .35, p < .01$) of youth. Active citizenship and political attitudes of youth were also significantly positively related ($r = .48, p < .01$).

Two separate hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to predict (1) active citizenship and (2) political attitudes of youth (in parentheses). In step one of the first regression analysis, with youth active citizenship as the dependent variable (Table 3), Parent-Adolescent Communication ($\beta = 0.10, p < 0.001$) was entered and found to be a significant positive predictor of youth active citizenship; adjusted $R^2 = 0.03$. When family active citizenship was entered in step 2, parent-adolescent communication was no longer a predictor of active citizenship of youth. Family active citizenship ($\beta = 0.26, p < 0.001$) proved to be a stronger predictor of youth active citizenship; adjusted $R^2 = 0.11$ than parent-adolescent

communication. The final model accounted for 11% of the variance of active citizenship of youth.

Table 3: Regressions Analyses Predicting Active Citizenship and Political Attitudes of Youth

| Variable | Model 1: Active Citizenship | | | Model 2: Political Attitudes | | |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------|---------|------------------------------|-------------|---------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | β | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | β |
| Step 1 | | | | | | |
| Constant | 16.28 | 1.21 | | 14.33 | 1.55 | |
| Parent-Adolescent Communication | 0.10 | 0.03 | 0.20* | 0.32 | 0.04 | 0.46* |
| Step 2 | | | | | | |
| Constant | 13.23 | 1.37 | | 10.83 | 1.77 | |
| Parent-Adolescent Communication | 0.02 | 0.04 | 0.05 | 0.24 | 0.05 | 0.35* |
| Family Active Citizenship | 0.26 | 0.06 | 0.31* | 0.30 | 0.08 | 0.25* |
| <i>R</i> ² | | .11 | | | .26 | |
| <i>F</i> for change <i>R</i> ² | | 19.11 | | | 31.55 | |

***p* < 0.001

In step one of the second regression analysis, with youth political attitudes as the dependent variable (Table 3), parent-adolescent communication ($\beta = 0.32, p < 0.001$) was entered and found to be a significant positive predictor of political attitudes of youth; adjusted $R^2 = 0.21$. When family active citizenship was entered in step 2, parent-adolescent communication remained a significant positive predictor of political attitudes of youth. This means that the effects of parent-adolescent communication on political attitudes of youth are not mediated by family active citizenship as they both remain significant. The final model accounted for 26% of the variance of political attitudes of youth. The results of the regression analyses suggest that both parent-adolescent communication and family active citizenship, when combined, accounted more for the variance for political attitudes than active citizenship of youth by 15%.

Discussion

In general, the results support Easton's theory of political systems, both in the case of highlighting significantly positive relationships between the variables and in the case of the regression analyses. Evidently, the family has an important role to play in developing and shaping behaviours and attitudes of citizenship in the youth. In fact and as described by Easton (1968), the family is vital in contributing to and maintaining the political system. Therefore, and in the context of concerns expressed about the youth's disinterest in politics and the quality of emerging democracies, the micro-environment of the family provides a fundamental space within which citizenship can be nurtured.

In particular and on the one hand, the findings suggest significant positive relationships between parent-adolescent communication, family active citizenship and youth active citizenship. These findings are clearly aligned to previous studies exploring the role of the family in political socialization. Studies conducted by Andolina, et al (2003), Quintelier, (2013) and Cicognani, et al (2012) suggest that political discussions in the family and politically active parents influence the attitudes and behaviours of the youth. In fact, in all these studies children whose families discuss politics in the home and participate in politics (either through volunteering or protest action) are more likely to exercise their citizenship.

More specifically, the results suggest that parent-adolescent communication together with family active citizenship is a stronger predictor of youth active citizenship than parent-adolescent communication in and of itself. Our findings show that political discussions between parents and their children account for only 3% of the variance for active citizenship. However, having political discussions with parents *and* observing family actively exercising their citizenship increases the variance for youth

active citizenship by an additional 12%. Indeed discursive participation (talking about politics) is important in the context of political socialization (Delli Carpini, amongst others). In fact some evidence elevates political discussions with parents as the strongest parent-related predictor of various other civic measures. More specifically, the work of Andolina, et al, 2003; Delli Carpini, et al, 2004 and McIntosh 2007 reveal that political discussions with parents are more likely to influence the youth's involvement in future political activities. Therefore we can infer that children who are engaged in political discussions in the home are more likely to become involved citizenship activities in their community and broader society.

On the other hand however, the work of Jennings and Niemi (1974); Nesbit (2012); Cicognani, et al, (2012) reveal that socialization through civic volunteering and membership of community based organizations have a greater effect on the likelihood of the youth engaging in politics later in life than socialization emanating from political discussions. More recent research based on the experiences of Belgian adolescents accentuates similar findings. Accordingly, the work of Quintelier (2013) suggests that "children of politically active parents are more likely to engage in political discussions, not only in the home but also at school and with peers" (p.2). Notwithstanding the significance of these prior studies, our results emphasize the influence of a combination of political discussions and observing parents engaged in political activities on the citizenship attitudes and behaviours of the youth.

In terms of political attitudes, both parent-adolescent communication and family active citizenship were significantly positive predictors of political attitudes of youth and accounted for 26% of the variance. In fact, in this model there were no mediating variables, which could mean that both parent-adolescent communication and family active citizenship had a positive effect on the political attitudes of youth. The term "political attitude" is derived from the psychological construct "attitudes", which according to Corsini (2002) is defined as "...complex products of learning, experience and emotional processes and include enduring preferences...prejudices...and political predilections." (p. 76). This then means that there has been an exposure to a learning environment, such as communicating with parents, which has been internalised by the young person. As mentioned earlier research suggests that when children discuss political topics with parents they are more likely to develop a political identity (McDevitt, 2006).

In addition, Beck and Jennings (1982) found that a variety of political learning environments predisposed young people to become politically engaged adults. These political environments included parental political activity and civic orientations. Specifically, civic orientations of parents were the primary predictors of pre-adult

political learning. More recently, Jennings, Stoker & Bowers (2009) conducted a longitudinal study examining socialisation within the family. The results of their study suggest that there is a direct link between political activities within the family and political cues provided by parents over time. These findings then could explain the independent effects of both parent-adolescent communication and family active citizenship, but when combined provided more variety for political learning, which could subsequently result in political attitudes of youth.

Limitations of the study

As a first study in South Africa, this study provides us with an understanding of political socialization within the family. However, this study as with any study has limitations. *Firstly*, this is a cross-sectional study and therefore only provides a snapshot in time of the relationships between the variables. *Secondly*, this study was conducted with a specific sample in a particular area, which has a specific socio-political history. Perhaps different findings would result if the study was conducted with a different sample and context. *Thirdly*, the data was self-reported by participants. This has meant that we did not include other family members' perspectives of political socialization within the family. However, this was a study which focused on the youth in the family and therefore served the purpose for the aim of the study. Future research could then provide the platform for this.

Conclusion

With the above in mind, the state needs to explore avenues to gain access into the private space of the family in an effort to deepen the youth's interest in politics and consequently preserve democracy. We do however acknowledge the influences of other agencies of socialization on the attitudes and behaviours of the youth. Therefore, future studies focusing on the varying influences of socializing agencies (that includes the family) on the behaviour and attitudes of the South African youth would be interesting.

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